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### Disappearing Act

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DISAPPEARING ACT

By

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BA, Knox College, Galesburg, IL, 2012

Thesis

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Disappearing Act

Chairperson: Debra Magpie Earling

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*Disappearing Act* is a manuscript of fiction consisting of four short stories: “Disappearing Act,” “California Zephyr,” “Lost & Found,” and “We Run to the Desert.” The collection explores issues pertaining to relationships, sexuality, and the myriad definitions of both platonic and romantic love.

## DISAPPEARING ACT

It's on the drive home from a camping trip when I realize, with a shock, that I've fallen in love with two people and tomorrow will probably fall for a third. I call my husband.

"We should do more things," I tell him from across the country.

"Sure," is what he says. "I'm on board." What I hear is, "I love you, I just love you so much, you're amazing, don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me."

It's October and the rivers are low and the grasses are turning wheat colored and I can't stop disappearing. Physically, I go to little campsites with fire rings and damp gray logs for sitting on, the ground tamped down by many boots now gone to do whatever the boots of other people do. Sit in closets; walk other trails.

This makes the campsites sound lonely and noble, but in fact I never go alone, because: bears. Because: cold nights. I go with my two friends, who are better at hanging bear bags and carry utilitarian pocket knives everywhere they go. It's good to have friends who can both open tin cans and slice wild onions in the woods. I don't know if it's so good to have friends with

whom you're irreparably in love. Turns out it's difficult to be so happy that it makes you nauseous.

They're both asleep in the backseat.

"I want to be expansive," I say to the phone, and the phone relays it to my husband. "I want to do things that make me feel huge inside. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really, but we can get there," he says. He has the faith of a Labrador retriever waiting at an empty window—worried but unwavering. I guide the car through gentle folds in the hills, parting drifts of fog with the headlights, friends in tow.

When we get home, I drop them off, and go back to my place for tea. As the kettle starts whistling, I spot Danny from next door and call him into my house. He could use a bath, but otherwise is pretty nice, and dumb, and easily excitable. I like the company. Together we eat Triscuits and he snoops around my couch, checks out the upstairs. He likes to spread out on my sheepskin rug in the bedroom.

"Yo, Danny, I like you and all, but my room is off limits," I say.

"Spit out my socks, please," I say.

Danny is a dog, of course.

He goes into the kitchen next and finds a plate of leftover birthday cake on the counter, which he quickly devours, straining to reach it with the side of his mouth. Afterward he looks a little sick, but keeps sniffing around the baseboards for crumbs.

"You cannot have your cake and eat it too," I tell him, a little bitter because that's what my husband told me. Danny throws up the cake.

~

I've been in love with friends before, but lately it seems they're multiplying. Danny runs around the neighborhood without a collar on and I keep running after him for something to do, unless he hits the river. There are too many willows with too few leaves and they'll cut up my legs. So instead I walk into town, where I'm bound to run into someone I know.

One of these friends with whom I'm in love keeps leaving me poems in unexpected places: tucked into the toes of shoes or wrapped around the spokes of my bike or dangling from a string strung up to a robin's nest. You do not have to repent, she insists. She too has a knife and uses it to cut the poems down into pocket sized squares, the better for hiding. Its dull blade leaves the edges of the paper feathered, soft as cloth. When I find them, I run my finger along their edges to see if I can slice a little paper cut, but I never can.

~

I met my husband in a little town in the middle of the country's middle when we were both young dumb shits who thought we were smart young shits who could intellectualize our feelings, who could fall in love both madly and methodically. We went about carefully denying the fact we both had an overwhelming impulse to disappear into each other. I wanted to light entire fields of corn on fire and dance naked in the heat waves, but usually we'd go one town over to see a movie instead. It felt the same. Sitting in the car beside him, driving in the dark on the highway with the sound of tires like submerging your head under running water, I might as well have been ablaze.

It rained on our outdoor wedding and the officiant's umbrella broke and my hair went flat and it was the happiest kiss of my life. The lines of my husband's grin were like beautiful

parentheticals in the middle of what was an otherwise disastrous sentence. He saved me without insisting I needed to be saved.

We moved to a house in a city on a plain thousands of feet above sea level where the air was too thin to breathe and perhaps we mistook our lightheadedness for happiness. He became a lawyer. Eventually I got a job elsewhere. I moved to a smaller town; he stayed in the city.

~

At the grocery store, already too hungry to function, my husband and I used to hover over the butcher's case.

"How about spicy sausage?" I would say.

"Nah," he'd say.

"Bratwurst?"

"That's the same as sausage."

"Beef patties?"

"No..."

"Salmon?"

"No..."

"Shishkabobs."

"No..."

"Fine, what do *you* want?"

"Sweetheart, I want whatever you want."

I still wonder what about marriage makes it okay to say things that are patently untrue.

~

A few years ago, long before my friends with their pocket knives and poems, I realized every place I'd ever been still existed just the way I left it. I started visiting these places. I could get to some from out my back door, others required more travel, but they were all there. I just had to remember them.

When I found the hundred-year-old house in the hundred-year-old town where my husband and I met, I decided to take him back there for our anniversary. It's where we went to college, out in the middle of an endless cornfield. It took days to drive there and the telephone wires lining the road made huge graceful dips as the car sped by. The corn was tall, thick, and talkative when we rolled the windows down. It said *hush*. We didn't follow any particular route because there wasn't one—like all the places I visit, you have to think your way there.

My husband and I felt out the turns together—a right here, straight for ten miles; no, hold on, go back; take a left over that covered bridge. Remember those farmhouses? Yes, we're getting closer.

Finally we emerged, bumping over a surprise sidewalk into a parking lot near our town's convenience store. It's all wide neglected pavement and falling down porches there, the criss-cross of wires above brick streets, mildew mixed with history. The sidewalks heave up like tectonic plates with pillows of moss in the cracks.

Humidity sat heavy in the air and made my shirt cling to my chest like a damp hug. There were already moons of sweat beneath my husband's arms—the heat made him cranky.

We worked our way to the far side of town, to our old house, and found it in about the same shape as always. We took our shoes off and ran the soles of our feet across the lawn, more broadleaf weeds than grass. Inside, we touched our palms to the kitchen floor where we used to



sit cross-legged for meals even though we had a dining room. We'd shovel loads of spaghetti marinara straight from the pot to our mouths while our friends, all majoring in studio art, made tiny yarn sculptures on the counters. Malt liquor seemed to flow in perpetuity.

I kept a menagerie of misfit animals in those years—a goldfish named Ahab (belly up within a week, predictably) and a reclusive albino rat my roommate rescued from the science lab. There was briefly a chinchilla. He chewed a page out of every book I owned. In the bedroom upstairs, I kept an African Gray parrot who would bite for the bone. I first fell in love with my husband because he stayed quiet when that bird bit his hand. He sat down on my bed on the dusty floor, pressed a cloth to his bloody palm, and squeezed his eyes shut until he could stand again. Then he kissed my cheek.

“Yikes,” was all he said. He was barely nineteen. He let angry things be angry. He never blamed them, or blamed me for keeping them. He never asked anyone to change.

~

The first person I ever slept with was a man ten years my senior who rolled his own cigarettes. I've since wondered, what right did he have to make me yearn for the taste of smoke on someone else's breath?

The next was a boy my age who got so overwhelmed when I asked him not to get dressed, to stay the night instead, that he started crying, and kept crying until he fell asleep. I've since wondered, what right did I have to uncover his longing?

And then there was my husband, long before he became my husband, when he was still just called Arthur. We pried each other open and stitched each other up without ever having to question our rights, our wrongs.

~

I led my husband to the concrete basement of our old house with a gentle pull. New students had obviously moved in—their ironic art hung everywhere—but they weren't home. We had free reign to explore.

There in the corner of the basement, his drum set. Above our heads, the pipework. I could still spot the patch job on one of the ducts, holding strong from one party where a rowdy guest tore it down. This basement used to be one of bodies. We packed people shoulder to shoulder on Saturday nights and sometimes it would get so hot with head-banging that shirts came off. The levels on the music were never right. The vocals buzzed. My husband, not then my husband, kept time for the band the way you'd direct a bar fight. I first saw him or he first saw me or we first saw each other through all those people in the noisy silence between sets. I was in the corner wearing a black cut-off tee. He was clean shaven, all young skin, hair stuck to his forehead. He kept smoothing the sweep of his bangs.

I wanted to give him the memory of that night for our anniversary. "Do you like it?" I asked, and flipped on some twinkle lights, dusty strands looped loose and low across the ceiling. I tried to take him into a slow dance, but he hesitated. I think it surprised him to find out I could conjure up our old spots.

"I do," he said, "But—" The students were back, tromping around upstairs. "I just want to make sure you know how to get us back home?"

~

Mondays and Wednesdays I have to show face at my office. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. The office is across a river in a nice green field, through majestic looking doors made, apparently, for giants, because they are ten feet tall. Once inside of the giant doors, you descend away from the sunlight, down a hall, to a far corner illuminated by fluorescent overheads. This is where they keep the middle-aged women in pant suits. They are all divorcees. They are all empowered. One day when I walk in, they are all crying.

Because I am young and sometimes wear pencil skirts, they assume I don't have a husband, and because they think I don't have a husband they think I need to hear about their husbands, or rather ex-husbands, and how the bastard took the chihuahua, or the dachshund, or the money.

I am very adept at not engaging. Because I am silent and ask no questions, they think I am a vessel for filling. I don't ask why they're crying, but they tell me anyway. Belinda, their leader, is being forced into retirement. Rhonda, who sometimes yells "They are making a fool of me, Mother!" behind her closed office door, sobs once and exits to the bathroom. These are grown women.

Wednesdays are Casual Hump Day, wherein everyone can wear jeans mid-week and joke about casual humping. We're done with fucking and feeling, all the divorcees laugh, but the harder they laugh the more obvious it becomes: all they want to do is fuck and feel.

Mary laughs the hardest. She sits out front and has a rare autoimmune disease that makes her eyes droop slowly closed. Sometimes, inexplicably, I want to tell her my deepest secrets. Sometimes—I want to tell her—sometimes I clean the baseboards straight out of the shower. I crouch naked and scrub. Last week, I woke up at 5 in the morning, cleaned my entire kitchen,

made a dutch baby, ate one sliver, and went back to sleep for another four hours. My husband calls this behavior “angry cleaning.”

Mary has a miniature gumball machine she fills with different candies. It’s the type of thing that can dispense items for free—all you have to do is flip a little switch on the underside, but Mary won’t flip the switch. Instead she keeps a jar of pennies in her drawer so that when people reach for the machine, she can seem benevolent by pressing a coin into their palm.

~

The Man Who Smoked lived in an apartment many miles away down a magic highway. Magic because I was 17 and only drove it in the dark. The pavement was an artery that passed from my city to his and everything in between was empty. Maybe some cows lowing in the fields. Combines working at ungodly hours, sweeping searchlights across the low rows of curly soybeans. Otherwise, not a single light.

He would send me a message late—“Movie?”—and I would drive an hour to not watch a movie.

He lived at the mouth of the highway. The exit would yawn and catapult me round and deposit me at a stoplight. At the stoplight I turned left. Just beyond and on either side were the glittery lights of gas stations and bars and a university campus, but I would go to the end of this road, just short of the city, and tuck my car into a cul-de-sac and there in the curve of that cul-de-sac was the apartment complex and nothing else. The complex was made of stairs. Up three flights, then an outdoor walkway, then down two flights, to the left, up one flight, knock on the yellow door to the right. Sometimes he answered, sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes it was a woman with a baby and she would tell me, “Oh no, he doesn’t live here any more. Check

upstairs.” I would find him upstairs in the exact same apartment—same layout, same couch, same can of beans tipped over on the counter, a group of blonde college girls eternally stationed at the railing just down the walkway, staring out at the parking lot, flicking cigarette ash into the tree branches.

Once, the Man Who Smoked made me popcorn. We didn’t eat it. We took off our clothes and went to the courtyard outside instead. In the courtyard there was a pool. It was June. It was July. It was August. The air was warm, everything full and green, and I never did like swimming but there I found I could slip under the water without even holding my breath. I felt much older under the water and I’m sure the Man Who Smoked felt much younger. We were graceful. The water enveloped our bodies, held them suspended, and the pool lights illuminated us from below. I took vast impossible breaths under the water. I breathed deeper than ever before. I defied physics, defied everything.

The Man Who Smoked didn’t care about me and I could have sworn I didn’t care that he didn’t care about me. We came up from under the water full of desire. God, how I loved that wanting. He rolled a cigarette sitting naked in one of the lounge chairs, the undersides of his thighs doughing out between the plastic slats. I floated with my arms on the ledge, listening to crickets chirrup from the dark garden of woodchips and fern plants surrounding the pool deck, while he persuaded thin paper to hold his tobacco. He had a lot of hair. Hair on his chest, hair on his arms, thick hair now slicked back on his head. He wore a necklace with an amulet of the third eye.

How strange to think he was younger then than I am now.

Another third eye, larger and carved from wood, hung above his bed unblinking. When I asked him about it he explained, “It’s for protection, to keep you safe.” By *you* I knew he did not mean me.

I don’t go there anymore, to that pool, but I used to. After my husband fell asleep, I would slip on my shoes and a coat and drive until I found the artery that was that highway and go there to stand beside the pool’s fractal light.

What was it I went looking for exactly? What did I expect? To find him rolling that same cigarette in that same lounge chair? In all the times I went, I never saw him once. Still I waited. I wanted to lecture him on responsibility, on what it means to be older than another person. Take pride, I wanted to tell him. Pay attention, I wanted to say. Or really: you were supposed to take care of me.

~

I call up a hotel one day to see if I can book a surprise trip for me and my husband, because despite how it might look, I don’t want to disappear. I call a place we stayed at years ago. As I recall, it had solid stone walls and mazelike hallways. We kept opening doors to find here a kitchen, there a cathedral, here some strangers, there a library. All the surprises made us giddy and when we finally found our room, we bought wine and bread and cured meats to celebrate. The hotel looked like a small house from the outside but extended for miles on the inside. I think maybe we can go there to get lost in the labyrinth and disappear together.

The receptionist answers. I’ve forgotten this hotel is actually in Rome and they only speak Italian. “Pronto? Pronto, pronto?” says the receptionist. I know she’s just saying hello, but I feel pressured.

Just then, Danny runs by my window trailing a strand of sausage links from his mouth. My friend the sausage maker runs after him, distressed. I should really go help. I lay the phone down and rush outside. Tomorrow—I'll book a room tomorrow.

~

At the climbing gym, all the rock rats stand on the mats and slap their forearms. I came here for some reason I can't remember now, and end up staring at the fruity pebble variety of handholds with everyone else. I touch one. I pull myself up once but I'm too embarrassed to go any further. Some other asshole prances his way up a sloped wall with sinewy shoulders flexing and I think, *who are these people?*

I go home, having filled my quota for feeling lonely this day.

~

I bump into my poem friend one day down by the river and she asks about my husband. We decide I should take a road trip so I can visit him and that's exciting. It's so exciting that I tell the rest of my friends, and we decide to go together, and then we decide that in lieu of visiting my husband we should just go to Canada instead.

I can fit four friends in the front seat, nine in the back, and thirteen in the trunk. *This is getting a little out of hand*, I think, *and we only have one tent*. But also I feel so light I could float right out of the driver's seat. It's raining when we embark, but soon we pass into a chasm between one cloud and the next. We left late enough that now the sunlight is lateral and makes for an astonishing rainbow. It's so crisp and vibrant and its arc is so complete it seems like a

gateway made just for us. To where I'm not sure—an alternate reality of moral relativism probably. We all start shouting because moral relativism is fun.

When that's done, and it's dark, and the cabin of the car is close and quiet, we try to tell each other everything about ourselves. It feels a little like confession, but in this case we're all priests and all sinners and if there's a lattice to separate one from the other then I can't see it.

"When I was seventeen, I slept with Mr. Fitzsimmons," says the girl I know from grade school. We first met at her eighth birthday party, where she stood silent in the middle of thirty screaming children as a zookeeper draped the belly of a python across her outstretched arms. Itsropy body went gliding up her biceps and drooped in a warm u-shape around her neck. I've been in love with her for a long time, since before my husband, since before anything.

"I've never been to Dairy Queen," says my friend who leaves me poems. I love her because when we dance, I forget my body.

"You're the only people I haven't lied to," says my punk rock friend with a pierced septum. I love him because he comforts scared dogs and scoops drowning bees from the river.

"I think I'm lost," I say. Everyone nods knowingly. They sense my disappearance. They know I haven't called my husband for weeks and that he's still waiting but I am not, that I wander a little further every day.

You do not have to repent, they remind me. They let the rain on the car roof swell to fit the silence and they put their hands on my shoulders through the seat back and squeeze like they're hanging on, like we're all hurdling together at 70 miles-per-hour, away from a town called Resentment toward a place called No-Need, but I feel cavernous and I know they mean well but I'm shaking my head. It's just that I'm already in the desert. I already bloodied my knees. "Sorry," I say, "I mean I think I missed our exit."



~

Once, not long after moving away from our city on the plain, I was supposed to meet my husband in Vegas. Off-season deals and a bachelor party conspired to bring us together in Adult Disney Land: the Saddest Place on Earth.

I booked a room for one night only. The plan was to stay there or wander around the desert streets until my husband could slip away from the bachelor party unnoticed. He'd come find me under the lights. Ours would be the one true thing in Vegas.

It rained for the first time in seven months on the day I arrived. The pavement was all breath and release. Bikini girls fled from the pools and I watched circles spread out on the water's surface from my room above. My husband's flight was late. In fact, it never even arrived.

When the rain stopped, I ventured out to the platform walkways and rode the outdoor escalators. Girls girls girls, the men told me. I got on another escalator. I never saw the sun go down but it got dark and I ended up beneath a megatron advertisement for face cream. The skin of a woman seven stories large illuminated everyone walking below. She rubbed the cream on her cheek using three fingers. Her shoulders moved this way and that and then she winked and then the three finger rub started all over again.

I put some pennies in a slot machine thinking it would be nice to pull a lever, but couldn't find the lever. Something like Tetris with fruit came on the screen. I got a diagonal line of bananas and lost fifteen cents. Next to me, thirty-plus bachelorettes in tiaras started screaming and glitter came out of their pores. "*I won!*" they said. Later I saw them crowded in a corner with a casino rep. You could tell he worked for the Man because of his baggy suit and ID card dangling from a lanyard. He handed a check to the front woman.

“Good work tonight. Pit C on Saturday—Todd has you guys on escort duty for some Turkish high roller.”

That paycheck was probably nickels compared to what they had pretended to win earlier. The irony wasn't lost on anyone—I heard one bachelorette say maybe they'd win for real sometime and get the fuck out of dodge. They all had the same face, but different bodies. Fat bodies, skinny bodies, strong bodies, cocky bodies, soft bodies. They trooped down the carpeted walkway behind their friend, the original bachelorette. The dull thud of their many stilettos was my first inkling: other people had friends instead of husbands. Other people had hordes of other selves following them around, promising to get them the fuck out of dodge.

~

Here is what it means to start a new life before your old life is completely in the garbage: you wake up early because your dreams are unfamiliar. You think, *I can do anything I want!* And then you do the exact same thing you did yesterday.

My friend the punk rocker wakes up with me, not because he's beginning a new life too but because he wishes he was. He used to hop trains and once, in high school, he and a friend hitchhiked their way to an anarchist summer camp. While there, they set the camp's main building on fire, because fuck the patriarchy! Except then they had nowhere to sleep and no sleeping bags, so everyone went home.

He doesn't rage against the man so much anymore. He's so hopelessly in love with me he says it gives him faith—in what I'm not sure. Last night, we pulled off the highway at a dive bar I used to frequent with my husband in the first years of our marriage. I spotted it, 500 miles north from its original location, and made a crazy left turn so my friends and I could all get a drink. I

bought them tequila shots beneath the neon visage of John Wayne, and just before closing time I tried to kiss my punk rock friend. He turned his head away.

“Not yet,” he said, very close to my ear. “I want to do this right.”

Then we did it wrong anyway.

We walked to a motel down a gravel frontage road, our bodies like planets, each with its own gravitational pull. My friends straggled out of the bar in twos and threes behind us.

Before getting into bed, my punk rock friend scooped a stray boxelder bug off the pillow and placed it gently outside. In the dark, I put my nose to his neck and breathed in, the way I would with my husband. It was a muscle memory I couldn’t quite kick. I put my hands in all the same old places, on his shoulders, in his hair, and I tried not to look for my husband, really I did, but I couldn’t help it. Every part of my friend prompted involuntary surprise. His shoulders were softer. His hair was receding. His nose piercing sometimes clicked against mine.

Afterward my chest felt so hollow an orchestra could have played there. I listened. They were warming up. They were out of tune. My punk rocker pressed two fingers to my forehead while I fought to calm the riot of strings. “Have you ever found your third eye?” he asked.

This morning we lie together watching the clouds outside the motel window go from tawny to salmon to hot white to cotton white. The rest of my friends are outside this room, sleeping peacefully in the motel hallways, under the breakfast buffet, across the night attendant’s desk. When I finally crack the door, I see they’ve doubled in number. I started with twenty-five or so and now there must be fifty.

~

Mondays used to be Talk About Your Feelings Day. The therapist had a calendar of wiener dogs wearing sweaters and peeking out from flowerbeds. Her couch sported a flare for the geriatric with its floral patterns and sun-faded cushions, like something out of a Marie Callender restaurant. No one knows those exist—brick and mortar Marie Callender locations—but they do. There was one where I grew up. I used to sneak there on my high school lunch hours to eat chocolate cream pie and quell my crippling social anxiety. That’s basically what I tried to do with the therapist, too, but no pie. Much healthier. Much less fun.

“You love how many people?” she asked me once.

“I’m not sure. A lot.”

“So you enjoy the thrill of the chase,” she tried to paraphrase.

“No, I hate it.”

“You want to fall in love again?”

“No, no, I’m in love with my husband.”

“But you enjoy cultivating new intimacy.”

“Yes, I do like that.”

“Except you want something no strings attached.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

She pursed her lips. “Now you’re contradicting yourself.”

~

You know what’s great? Lying your pants off. You get to be anything you want and then you get to take your pants off.

~

74 miles from the border, just outside a one-block town somewhere in way north Montana, the car breaks down. We can see a burger and bar joint in the distance. There are sheer gray mountains flanking the valley through which this road runs, funneling us forward. Otherwise it's flat and bare. No fences, no turn offs, no curves or surprises, just the road straight and narrow taking us directly to where we're going. Except we can't get there.

"Everyone out, please," I instruct, and all my friends pile out of the doors and trunk, clown car style, and stand in a crowd on the gravel shoulder. Luckily one of my friends is an amateur mechanic, and she pops the hood with confidence. She pokes around for a while and reemerges, but she can't figure out what's wrong.

We end up putting the car in neutral and pushing it to the edge of town, where we park it on the side of the road and get some lunch. There are four buildings and none of them make any pretenses. They announce what they are in bold letters on wooden signs: Hotel. Bar. General Store. Feed.

We try the feed store first but it's not for people. The cashier points us to the bar which, it turns out, also serves coffee and pancakes and sandwiches and the town's signature cheeseburger, the Yack Attack. Inexplicably, the Yack Attack has nothing to do with yacks, but does involve Velveeta, julienned ham, and a pineapple slice. It is truly vile. We order fifty of them.

By the time we find a mechanic to look at the car, it's late enough that we decide to stay the night. We book up the entire hotel, a clapboard affair with four rooms on the first floor and four rooms on the second. My punk rock friend insists on paying for the whole thing, and keeps one of the rooms just for us. All my friends are standing in the lobby giving each other road trip

names. Adam, Lucy, Al, Genevieve, John, Billy, Annie, Chris, Brad, Brandon, Brett, Mack, Kevin, Monica, Nicki, Brooks, Lauren...I lose track handing out room keys, but everyone's having a good time anyway. How have we never named ourselves before? We should go on road trips always and pick a new name for every day.

My punk rock friend chooses Lucas for his road trip name. It sounds a little boy bandy to me considering his anarchist past, but I roll with it. "Lucas," I say. "Lucas, Lucas, Lucas." Until it's just a noise I'm making.

My friend who had reptile birthday parties now calls herself Jess. She picked that name because it sounds like a snake getting punched in the mouth.

Since we're the only people in the hotel, we have a party. Brooks, an A/V nerd I know from high school, sets up a projector on the dresser in Room 3. We turn out the lights and play *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* on silent and dance around in our underpants. Brooks also brought speakers and we listen to Top 40 hits exclusively. I've spent so much of my life curating my music to be tasteful and acoustic, this pop sugar bullshit is a huge relief. I dance with abandon.

The projection of Steve Martin beams out and wraps around all of us in our Jockeys and Hanky Pankies, our lace and cotton, our unmentionables with slightly saggy bottoms. Some of my friends wear socks and I love how they look pulled up against their bare legs. I spot the kid who once insisted on giving me a sensual foot rub in my dorm room. He was very sweet but had a disproportionately large mouth and when we kissed he accidentally engulfed my entire chin. Last I heard he lived in California—I hadn't noticed him in the car. He's standing in the corner now looking nonplussed.

"How did you get here?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" he says. "You invited me."

~

I realize just about all of this story seems to take place at night. All the important parts anyway. I don't remember what I was doing during the day. Putting shoes on and walking to work like nothing had happened in all the nights preceding, or all my life previous, I suppose. That's what it takes to move forward with singular purpose: a lot of willful forgetting.

~

The first time I lay down for the Man Who Smoked, I was so drunk I was divine. I was bigger than my body, brighter than my mind, luminous with vodka and being seen.

He didn't belong there, at a house party full of young people pretending to be old enough to wish they were still young. Most of us hadn't graduated from high school. At least one girl was still in Driver's Ed. But the Man Who Smoked knew a friend who knew a younger friend whose parents were out of town and thus he arrived with a case of beer no one else could buy and became a hero.

I didn't belong there either, to be fair. I snuck in with a girl I loved, but who didn't love me. She kept me around mostly for the novelty factor. I didn't understand how to dress or straighten my hair or paint my nails. I lived under a rock called Stable Family Life Conducive to Academic Excellence and she was my excavator. Her parents exchanged verbal abuse in conversational tones every morning over coffee, but gave her wads of cash to make up for their discontent. She spent most of it on me. Concert tickets so I would know what was cool. Palettes of eye shadow and tubes of dark mascara. Fitted t-shirts. She laughed at how I moved my

costumed body but I could tell she needed to believe she had something to give, so I received. I answered all her late night phone calls.

“Come over,” she’d say. “My parents are fucked.”

I would climb in through her window and sit cross-legged on her canopied bed while she painted the delicate skin of my eyelids. “Quit blinking—I’ll stab you in the eye,” she’d say. Then, “You’re not like any of my other friends.” Under the soft press of her fingers, I told her she wasn’t like them either. She had a better heart, a sense of loyalty.

It was her I went to the party with, my only in. Outside, the house had an approachable driveway lined with mild white gravel, and gardenias blooming on the porch. Inside, there were rooms and rooms and rooms of people, all of them clear about what they were doing there. They talked and laughed at jokes. They knew to measure out the liquor first and pour the mixer second. They knew how to see double and let their limbs get heavy and sink into the furniture. It wasn’t until late that I met the Man Who Smoked. He was rolling a cigarette in the kitchen and offered me a beer when I floated in alone—I’d lost my friend to a room with a banjo player and hula hooping.

Before long he had an arm around my waist or maybe just his eyes on my back as I journeyed through the house, each dark room. He trailed close behind and I felt a little bigger every room I passed through until I reached the last one, and I lay down and he took a final drag of his cigarette. There was a computer screen flashing a cursor. At one point, I excused myself to a bathroom so I could smile in the mirror as big as I needed to without him seeing. I thought I’d finally become beautiful like everyone else. I wanted to see what had changed.



When I returned, he positioned my arms and legs like a museum curator doing important work. He gathered his hands in the back of my hair and filled my lungs with tobacco breath and I tried to hold it as long as I could, sucking in and in and in.

~

In my old life, my husband and I furnished our living room with matching lamps and a maple coffee table. We had a dinner party once, soon after graduating college, and tried to play quarters, a game that entails bouncing quarters into a shot glass while heckling other players and acting rowdy. It didn't last long because we realized the coins were dinging up the stain on the coffee table, our one nice thing. Afterward, we kissed and went to bed and congratulated ourselves on making a successful transition into adulthood.

In my new life, I sit on the floor of a hotel room with no matching lamps, no coffee table, and sort of no husband. We tell ghost stories. I say sort of no husband because it's not that he's not present, he's just not here. He is my ghost story.

~

In Rapid City at midnight, on a late night grub run, I answer a call from my husband. I stand in the snack aisle staring at mountains of crackers, particularly those cookies masquerading as crackers with a French schoolboy on the box—you know, the ones with half a chocolate bar pasted to each biscuit. Lucas sits outside with a bottle of wine, waiting to take us back to the campground where we will take off all our clothes in the tent.

“How can something made mostly of milk chocolate get shelved with the crackers?” I want to ask my husband, but can’t because he thinks I’m at home. He doesn’t know about Canada or my many friends.

So I say, “Hey, sweetheart.”

And he says, “I miss you.”

And the intercom says, “Janice, Smucker’s restock, now.”

I try to smash the mouthpiece of my phone against my cheek to muffle it.

“Where are you?” my husband asks.

“In bed,” I tell him. I’m sure he doesn’t believe me, but he wishes me a good night anyway. *I’m a monster*, I think. *Monster, monster, monster*. It’s too bad shame never stopped anyone from doing anything. I grab a box of cookies and go outside.

~

You know what’s not great? Lying your pants off. Bare legs are ugly things. Have you looked at your knees lately? Look at them.

~

I have one-hundred friends now. I have one-hundred friends and the Montana sky and an imaginary line I’m trying desperately to find. The border is like that graphing equation from high school—the one where a line approaches the axis, draws infinitely closer, but never crosses. Canada is the axis, our car is the line.

The odometer reads 15,000 when we pick up our 101<sup>st</sup> friend, in fact no friend of mine. We round a bend in a valley, or maybe it’s that we top out on a mountain, but in any case the

Man Who Smoked is standing there in the gravel of the highway's shoulder. He has a backpack and a cigarette. When I pull up, he looks the exact same as he always did, except he's gained weight. And his clothes are rattier. And his hair is longer. And his five-o'clock-shadow brings out the hollows under his eyes. So in fact he looks very different, objectively, but isn't that the bitch of it? He'll always look the same to me.

He says my name. I can see him digging out the memories, searching. "Haven't thought about you in years," he says.

Apparently he went back to school, a surprise to both of us. He became a geologist and now spends most of his days taking samples of striated rock formations. He studies the accumulation of time, all those minutes and hours and years stacked together and compressed into a single space. It doesn't bother him, all that history written in stone. He sleeps soundly at his job sites and hitches rides back to town when his contracts are up. He's worked for scientists and oil companies, pipeline contractors, universities, the state. He ends up getting fired often, but knows how to get paid regardless.

"Can I get a lift?" he asks. This is it! I can say no and keep driving, deny him in the way I've always wanted. In what world does anyone get this kind of second chance? All my searching at the pool, those long, lonely drives with my husband still in bed while I went looking to pluck the cigarette out of this man's mouth and extinguish it beneath my heel. Just the simple turn of a wheel and press of a pedal.

But I don't, of course. He's already in the car, never even needed to ask. I made room for him a long time ago.

~

Change occurs on the level of the gesture. I remember hearing that somewhere.

~

When I was three-years-old I put on a cowboy outfit and didn't take it off until I turned eight. Five years straight I wore chaps, a leather vest, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat. My parents couldn't persuade me otherwise. Kids couldn't bully me out of it. My grade school teachers compromised as long as I left my cap gun at the classroom door. I made one exception and dressed like a cavalry soldier for two weeks, but it all came from the same place. My imagination bent toward the rugged loner, self-possessed and masculine. I kept dressing like a boy even after the cowboy phase died out. It wasn't about wanting to be a man—I never wished that. It was more about hunger. Even early on, I sensed men were the people positioned to devour. I imagined myself on a long-strided horse eating up mile after mile after mile. I imagined I would consume vast distances, that my life would naturally deliver me to the mouth of unknown territory.

Technically, I wasn't wrong. I am at the mouth of something, by which I mean I'm sitting at an uneven picnic table eating a hot dog under the watchful eye of a giant Canadian Mountie. Giant because he's actually a billboard. "50 Miles to the Border!" he assures us. Yesterday we came within 10, but my 7<sup>th</sup> grade swim team friend needed to pee and the only rest stop was behind us. By the time we found it, we'd lost Canada.

A pimple-faced boy hands plate after plate of wieners down from a trailer window. The rest of my friends spread out along the roadside or settle down beneath the pine trees. The Man Who Smokes joins me at the table, followed shortly by Punk Rock Lucas. The two of them are never far from each other. Lucas feels usurped, and the man who smokes feels entitled, and

meanwhile I'm watching two of my former girlfriends intertwine fingers over the relish pump. When did that start happening, I wonder. Lucas takes a sulky bite of dog and the man who smokes pulls out his papers. It turns out the assumptions you make as a kid are invariably wrong, even when they're right. I always assumed I'd end up some place like this, with mountains and an endless highway. I dreamed my way straight to this hot dog stand, but it's not what I thought it would be. I'm not the one doing the devouring.

~

I get the idea maybe we can walk across the border, so everyone packs up their things and we ditch the car at a grassy trailhead. We spot a marten scrambling up a tree before we even start walking, which could be a good or a bad sign. Good because no one ever sees pine martens, bad because they're vicious little shits.

My hundreds of friends string out along the trail but there are only three who actually matter. They're closest on my heels: Punk Rock Lucas, Jess, and the Man Who Smokes.

Jess has a better sense than anyone for walking in the mountains and takes over navigating. Nevertheless, we end up a miserable line of ponchos for a bunch of hours because it's stupid and drizzling this far north where the world can't decide whether it wants to be an arctic tundra or a rain forest so it just does a little bit of both which is confusing and makes me want to tell this part of the world, "Hey, quit being an asshole so I can know what combination of clothing to wear," except that's probably what people think about me. The asshole part anyway. I make a point to compliment what people wear so they know they can wear anything they like. I'm at least that predictable.

~

We find a house tucked neatly in the mountainside, obscured by trees drooping long strands of dry gray moss. It's a familiar house a wide cement driveway lined by white gravel. There are gardenias growing in pots on the porch. It's the only structure for miles and miles. There are no roads; the trail doesn't even lead there. It scoops away along the path of the stream, whereas the house sits a couple hundred feet up in the thick of the forest. We never would have seen it except I went scrambling further than necessary to pee and caught sight of the shuttered windows.

It's still raining, sort of. The drops aren't big enough to fall exactly. It's more like they hang in the air until you walk into them and then they drip all over your face. My friends file gratefully out of the mist into the house, shedding their ponchos and roughing up their hair. We pile our muddy boots at the door. We change out of pants whose cuffs have collected every dirty puddle on their way up the mountain.

Inside, we find a coffee table with magazines and a few dirty dishes, beige carpet with some negligible stains, and a couch with the ex-girlfriend of the Man Who Smokes. Teghan is her name—her real name. She's reading *Wuthering Heights* and drinking a hot toddy. "Whiskey's in the kitchen," she says. No one needs persuading. I look around for the Man Who Smokes and spot him trying to recede behind some people so he can take a few shots unnoticed, for courage I assume.

I remember trying in vain to figure out Teghan so many years ago. She had dirty-blond hair she wore long and messy. Her clothes were always a little too much—too loose, too low, too loud. I accepted her reputation without realizing it was a reputation. I just assumed the girls people said were stupid were truly stupid, and the girls they said were easy were truly easy. I never thought they might be saying the same about me.

She was the only woman the Man Who Smoked ever dated, and it was me he found after she left him. I bumped into her once at a coffee shop where I'd gone to work on an English paper. She appeared from a table across the room.

"That poem kills me," she said when I told her about my essay topic. Only a year or two older, she was already most of the way through a degree in political science and read like a maniac, but no one ever talked about that.

"He'll make you feel special," she told me before leaving. "Just don't forget you actually are."

Now here she is again. And here he is sitting down beside her. Since when did this become a trip for his old friends, I wonder? I turn away. Outside the bugs are all silent because it's cold and wet, and maybe the occasional bull frog croaks but we can't hear it because inside the music is on. I'm making a conscious effort to get my head fuzzy. Soon everything is much funnier because everybody, this many whiskey shots in, forgets why it's worth anything to be serious. Lucas in particular forgets his own mortality and smashes shoulder-first into the bedroom wall. He breaks through to the studs and wants me to congratulate him, which I do, but only while trying to fit chunks of wall back together.

There's a commotion in the living room, but not the fun kind. It turns out Teghan doesn't want anything to do with the man who smokes.

"You should go to bed," she tells him. His eyes are having trouble focusing.

"I'm going fucking home," he says, which comes out sounding drunk, but his body is rod straight. He displays fantastic control. My friends step back or gather in doorways and try to keep their eyes down, but it's hard not to watch. When I try to step a little closer, Jess puts a hand on my shoulder and gives me a look like *don't hurt yourself*.

“No,” Teghan says. He shrinks visibly and I want so badly to have her words come out of my mouth. I can feel my vocal chords straining.

“No,” she says. “You can’t take the car.”

“No,” she says. “You won’t leave these people stranded.”

“No,” she says. “Do not put your hands on me.”

~

Men collect in my wake like dust at the corners of a shelf.

This is what Jess thinks, and she says it’s confusing because I’m so tidy in the rest of my life. She’s walked in on me scrubbing shower grout with a toothbrush before, stripped to my underwear like a crazy person. Sometimes my fingers cramp up and I walk around with claws for hands and if she sees me like that she says, “Let it go.”

If everyone had a life coach like Jess, the world would be a better place. She has biceps the size of Nerf footballs. The morning after Teghan tells off the man who smokes, Jess takes me for a walk in the dripping forest. We leave the house behind with people draped over the couches and asleep on the floor and we trudge up a path lined by neon ferns. We pass through three marshy meadows that I think look perfect for stopping, but Jess knows better. She keeps walking. A few more miles brings us to an unexpected campsite.

There are ponderosas and larches one-hundred-feet tall growing in a circle around some bare ground. On that ground: a plush layer of pine needles like loose sand. It’s still misting rain but the trees form a canopy so it’s quiet and dry in the circle. At the far end of the campsite, the mountain sides fall off in tumbles of granite along either bank of a narrow lake pointing away



from us like a finger. The water's surface patterns out in so many concentric circles overlapping. Patchy bands of cloud cling to the rock faces.

We make a fire in a pit and Jess tells me the story about how her dad divorced his first wife because she cheated and cheated and cheated.

"Is this story going to make me feel bad?" I say.

"No," she says. "Maybe. Whatever. All I'm saying is she kept showing up, my dad's ex-wife, for years. He married my mom and they'd go out to dinner and Sheila would be there. She'd show up in the garden when my dad was planting tulip bulbs. He told me he came downstairs in the middle of the night once to get some water and she was sleeping in the armchair. She always left when he asked, but then she'd come back. It became a kind of ritual. And it's not like she didn't have her own family—she remarried, too, and moved to Oakland or something, but she learned how to be in two places at once. She could be cooking eggs in California and eating breakfast with my parents in Ohio at the same time."

"That's horrifying."

"A lot of people do it. I just never understood how my parents stayed together with her around—I mean, can you imagine being my mom? Sheila called her a whore in front of my grandparents once."

I try to imagine Jess's mom, who wears wide-legged cotton pants and writes math puzzles in her spare time, being called a whore. Maybe this is something that should give me hope. Anyone can break free to be boring.

The fact that I never met Sheila means she eventually disappeared. I grew up in that house, at casseroles every Wednesday and attended every game night and never once did I have to battle Sheila over a Trivial Pursuit answer. These days Jess's parents are cyclists and

gardeners and they have their daughter who likes snakes and politics and being right. It's the closest thing to ideal I can think of. They just had to wait it out.

~

I spend 14 days writing a letter to my husband. I tell him everything, but end up crossing it all out until only one line is left. It reads: *I love you more than anything in the world but I hate your mouthwash. I think it smells like old person and I'm sorry I never told you that.*

~

I want to go to the ocean and the intricate labyrinth of the Roman hotel and climb mountains and go all the places where I was in love but mostly I wake up in the mornings and unzip the tent flap to see what the weather is doing. It's cloudy or it's sunny or today, particularly, it's snowing. Sideways. The sky is all one matte color, no depth to it. It's a trick nature plays or maybe a kindness trying to make it look like there's just one plane. There's nowhere else to go. The paralysis of choice is a thing I encounter every day. I work to keep my options wide open so anything is possible and as a result I can't make a move in any direction. The trouble is it has the same effect as being trapped on a single track but there's a higher rate of addiction. There are two kinds of people. Can I do this? The two kinds of people thing? There are two kinds of people. There are the people who can't leave a track and there are the people who can't get on one. The people who can't get on one aren't lazy—they're addicts. It's all about the endorphins of possibility.

~

Finally, finally, finally I give up. It's called being okay. Much like Canada, it's a state that only exists if you believe it does.

~

We turn the car around. Sometime in the blank collapse of time this road trip induced, an entire winter passed. I had no idea. I'm sure I spent days walking along sidewalks with hip-high snow banks in towns I don't have the names for anymore, but the only way I know is that I feel beat to hell. That, and seeing the buds on trees makes me want to cry, not so much because they're pretty but because I'm so exhausted I feel sorry for them. I can't imagine the energy it takes to make that final push to bloom. Those poor fucking flowers.

Before we head for home, Lucas wants to go one more place. It's a hot spring 40 miles off the highway, housed in the shell of an old barn with no roof. We book every guest cabin at the place. Everywhere veins of the mineral river snake through surrounding fields, sending up puffs of steam. It will frost one last time tonight. We pass the word around the cabins—skinny dip in ten. They can't stop all one-hundred of us!

We flood the pool area at midnight. Lucas undresses in the cloud coming off the hot pool. Everyone's edges are soft. It's hard to tell where one body ends and another begins, little piles of clothing collecting around the pool's edge, everyone shedding their outer layers, shrouded in steam. One by one all of my friends slip noiselessly into the water until only Lucas is left, naked except for a hat.

His skin is smooth and white, luminous in the dark. He is squat. He's trying to hide the way his body looks like an "S" with extra padding.

"Take off the hat," I tell him.

He won't take off the hat, but that's fine. We get in the pool together and swish the water back and forth to feel it tendrils past our bare skin. Everyone should swim naked at least once. It's such an accessible rebellion.

As I'm staring at the billows of steam, the way they gather and obscure the stars and then blow quickly away, Lucas slips an arm around my waist. The mineral water puts a silky film between my skin and his touch. I can feel all two-hundred eyes on us and I know it's time for a change to happen. Where is the Man Who Smokes? I can't find him among all my friends, appearing and disappearing in the clouds, but there's Jess doing a slow-motion breaststroke from one end to the other and back again.

"Lucas," I say to my punk rock friend, and take his gentle hand. I want so badly to ask for his hat again. I know he hates his bare head—there's too little hair for a Mohawk or even a comb-over anymore—and his embarrassment makes me want to see it. It's overwhelming, this desire to reassure him. It's also unfair. I want him to show me his bald weaknesses, his ugliest parts, but I don't want to look at them. I can't hold his heart; couldn't hold my husband's; can hardly hold my own.

"Lucas," I say. "I think you should go."

He understands immediately, but pretends he doesn't. I can tell he wants to cry. He says he wants to make the rest of the drive, that he and I could have something good when we all get back to town. Or perhaps we can go separately and meet up when we all get home.

I say his name. His real name.

After that, he doesn't protest any more. He sinks under the water, down and down and down, until he's all the way gone.

~

One by one my friends start disappearing for good—slowly at first so it’s really just the car getting lighter, and they’re the people I didn’t remember all that well in the first place. Some of them say goodbye, others just wander off. Donut shops and friendly kitchens seem to be especially magnetic. I always leave three or four of them sitting at a counter chatting up the waitress. Sometimes we manage to make good with locals in the towns we pass through and we all crowd onto a couch in their living room. Blankets and sleeping bags galore. It’s a relief to sleep anywhere other than the ground. But it also means in the morning, over biscuits and jam and muddy Folgers, a few friends ask to stay as the rest of us pile back into the car. Adam, Stephanie, Virginia, Paul—they relinquish their road trip names.

“I just have to get back,” says one of them, my sausage making friend.

“Are you sure? You could come just a little further,” I say, even though I know this is supposed to happen.

“Ground pork waits for no man, you know?” she says. “The people want their sausage.”

~

The bitterroot is blooming back home. My husband tells me to give him a little more credit—he knew it all along.

~

The first place I go without a husband is the airport. I’m not going anywhere in particular, or if I am I don’t know it. Cincinnati, the ticket reads. Or Kansas City? Santa Fe? It’s hard to tell.

The TSA agent who checks me through security wears a reflective workman's vest and follows at a polite distance to the flight gate. There, he takes my ticket and then escorts me across the tarmac. It's slick outside, sleeting, winter at last. The plane has propellers, like something out of Casablanca, only there's no Humphrey Bogart to see me off. It's just this TSA agent, who leaves me to take on his third role as bag man. He tosses my pack into the belly of the aircraft and jogs back inside, presumably to start all over again. Sisyphean. My shoulders hurt just thinking about the next ten years of his life.

The flight is empty except for one other person, a woman with blue hair and a lip piercing so small it looks like she ate a bowl of diamonds and forgot to wipe up. Tacky, would be the word for her. She sits in the seat next to me. Approximately one-hundred vacant spots and she shoves her overstuffed tote bag next to mine. The arms of gaudy sweaters droop from its open top like tentacles. She lets a heavy breath out.

"Are you going on vacation?" she asks.

"Not really," I say. A little terse yes, but I don't like making conversation on planes, especially not when my insides feel so hollowed out an orchestra could play there.

"Me neither," she says. We both slouch and are silent. Then she says, "I'm going to rehab."

Normally I would recoil from such an over-share, but I can feel the tired coming off her and for whatever reason this time I turn toward it. Maybe it's the riot of strings and French horns warming up in my chest cavity. I tell her I'm sorry and it's surprising how much I mean it. The cabin is already pressurized maybe. It's messing with my head. I want to lay down in her lap and rest there forever. I want to take her in my arms and suck up all her poison by osmosis.

“I’m going to a funeral.” It occurs to me this isn’t entirely untrue. *Why do I feel like someone has died?* my husband asked when we signed the papers. We had lived apart for years and I never missed him until right then.

My new rehab friend doesn’t offer any condolences, just nods, because we both know it’s all been said before.

At the head of the aisle a stewardess presents seatbelts and life vests. “Save yourselves!” she shouts, off script. Rehab and I both chuckle. How true! Our spines compress gently and then we’re in the air cruising steadily above uninterrupted clouds. I always want to cry on planes because it’s so overwhelming being strung up between earth and space. Who’s to say everyone won’t float away—the only tether is a jet fuel fuselage. Something about that liminal space that opens the door for every feeling you’ve ever had, because every door is a little bit open and a little bit closed.

“Isn’t it crazy how empty this flight is?” I say as the drink cart comes rattling our way, no stewardess behind it.

“Oh sugar,” says Rehab. “Look around.”

I do and it turns out there are people in every seat. It’s completely full. Two rows back sits a woman so old she should be dead. Liver spots blossoming across her forehead. She catches my eye and grins like I told her a joke. All her friends must be gone. Across the aisle is an oversized teenager, body growing so fast his face can’t catch up. You can tell he doesn’t have parents even though they probably waved him goodbye at the airport. The way he slumps to compensate for his height shames me. How could I have missed him? All of them? Wearing their lonesome selves like warm jackets.

~

At coffee after signing the papers—

Me: “Don’t look so sullen.”

Him: “I could say the same to you.”

Me: “We’re both going to be okay. You definitely will. You’re going to find some rocker chick who loves your suit and tie and gives you a hard-on every time she gets on stage. I could never do that.”

Him: “You gave me plenty of hard-ons.”

Me: “Ugh, I know. No, I meant I could never love you in a tie.”

Him: “I didn’t care about that.”

Me: “I thought I was the liar.”

Him: “What about you?”

Me: “Oh I’ll find some happy and impractical hippie. I’ll end up financially supporting us both.”

Him: “Sounds like a raw deal for you.”

Me: “See but that’s why we’re not married anymore.”

~

Some time passes. It becomes clear in fact nothing will be resurrected. The old life is dead and sometimes things stay that way—super dead. Zombie movies and Christianity be damned.

I saw my husband, no longer my husband now something else, at the Laundromat the other day. He looked cut out of cardboard and very clean. The cashier handed him a pile of limp suits and when he turned around he saw me in the waiting area, busy eyeing the revolutions of



my sleeping bag in between reading something trashy. This isn't a story about being embarrassed by one's ex. I could say I was also eating a mustard sandwich—not mustard and turkey, just mustard—but it would be irrelevant. I looked pathetic but I didn't feel that way. I knew we were both jealous of each other in our own right. A little bit of him wanted to smell so bad he needed an industrial washer for his underthings, and a little bit of me wanted the security of dry cleaned shirts and office politics.

What I couldn't get over was the cut of his sweater. It followed every line of his torso. And his hair, short on the sides and raked into place on the top. New glasses, with clear plastic frames like something from an exhibit on Swedish minimalism. Oh, the clean curve of his trimmed beard. People always talk about waking up one day to realize their husband isn't the man they married. I think I had the opposite problem. I woke up and realized he was exactly the man I always suspected he might be.

Michelangelo supposedly saw his sculptures within their raw material and simply carved away the excess to reveal what was there all along. I looked at my husband and thought not, "What happened to my shaggy haired musician," but "There he is, there he's always been." I fell in love with his excess, that's all. I was part of that excess and once it all got shaved away—bam. The real person. How strange to think you can spend so much time, so much deep time with a person, on the sole assumption you know each other, and come to find it was only the fatty parts.

~

Somehow, in this place where I don't live with my husband, this landlocked place between one glacial feature and another, somehow in this place there is also an ocean. I play hooky to go there, although playing hooky at this point simply means I leave the face of my laptop closed.

My boss, who is me, generally doesn't come looking for at least a couple of days and when I get back for some reason I'm always peeved at the absence of angry emails. No, "Where have you been?" or "You must remain available!"

The ocean is a long drive away and it's also cold, one of those unforgiving bodies, so when I go I pack a big bag. I bring wool socks, sweaters, and Fritos for their high fat content. It's snowy this time. That shouldn't be a surprise, it being December, but I'm easily miffed. My flip flops are inappropriate.

The last time I came here it was with my husband when we were very young, before he became my husband, when he was only called Arthur and he had a stupid mustache I still found sexy because it didn't fit him at all and he laughed at himself in the mirror every time he looked and I laughed at him laughing. Back then he had a rain poncho he wore everywhere, in part because it drizzled every day and the wind left deposits of sea salt on all our clothing but also because he thought it was funny, the poncho. We both did. Back then everything felt like the most exquisite joke, one only the two of us were in on.

Now I grit my teeth and deal with the snow on my toes, the compact wet sand underneath, and make it to the water's edge. There are strands of twinkle lights connecting the sloped roofs of the stone cottages making up the town behind me. There's a long dock on stalwart pillars reaching far out into the water, shored up by piles of boulders, longstanding rocks here since forever ago.

When I came here with my husband it was much warmer, but still damp. We wore jeans and beanie caps and picked our way across the rocks with shoulders touching. It was the middle of the night.

The tide left a great mysterious expanse of sand beneath the dock where we stood against the pillars and Arthur, whose side I never wanted to leave, reached a hand out of the depths of his ridiculous poncho and brushed my cheek. The lights went out. I'm not saying metaphorically—I mean the power went out that night, up and down the coast, and plunged us into a darkness so complete we couldn't see each others' faces an inch away. There was only wind and the perpetual collapse of wave after wave, swelling, reaching, sighing. My husband, who was not yet my husband but was still only Arthur, kissed me. Finally.

Afterward, we stared into the void, that void being the lightless ocean, like a black hole, like a vacuum force. Everything inside of me sucked out and I was both completely empty and completely full. That's when I learned that love is place called paradox where even the contradictions are true. I'd been naked before but never figuratively, not with the boy who cried or the man who smoked or the girl who traced my fingers with her shadow.

I come to this beach often. My friends trail along, sometimes just one or two and sometimes hundreds, but I never bring them to the water. They stay behind, peering out of windows or tucked away in pubs. They are my every permutation. We approach the boardwalk together, but at the sand they turn around with a squeeze of my hand. It's the only place I can let them go. At the water's edge, I stand and think of my husband and I know—I know we're side by side even though he's elsewhere, in another city, another state, another country, but it's the same beach, the same vast ocean. It's just that now we each stand alone, and all the lights are on.

## CALIFORNIA ZEPHYR

Anna's mother said to watch out for cult recruiters. She said this was how they operated: a nice young woman dressed like a free spirit would make feathery optimistic conversation with you on a bus or a train, especially the trains. Vulnerable people ride trains. She would offer you a piece of candy, most likely a Cheeba Chew, since those things were legal now, but it would be laced. Pretty soon you'd begin to droop and drift away from your own body. "Oh help!" the Free Spirit implores then. "My friend is sick." And a proactive man, pretending to be a stranger, steps up to help. He has a thick beard and muscular arms that lend credence to his claim he's a Wilderness EMT. He's wearing hiking sandals, too. But that's all part of this cult's charm—the members aren't allowed to shave or wear socks. Together, at the next stop, the couple hustle you off and that's the last you ever see of the real world. They keep you locked away on a compound until the brainwashing is complete, at which time you acquiesce to degradation, your brain so addled and flyaway with fried nerves and weed that the only viable path seems to be to lay down for all those bearded men. It takes two or three years to get to that point. After that you never want to go home again; probably don't even remember what or where home is.

Another important detail: these men rode bikes, in this particular cult. They were a sect of bearded cyclists. A lot of them came from Boulder, Colorado. Anna's mother had seen it all on *Dateline*. She finished spreading mayo on a ham and pickle sandwich, sealing it snugly into a Ziploc bag before she layered it into a small cooler alongside cold packs, chips, Coke, and grapes. Another likely thing was food poisoning from the club car—trains weren't subject to the same health inspections as brick and mortar establishments.

Her mother also warned her against well-groomed fraternity boys. They were the worst. A cult in and of themselves.

Anna's mom went to a state university herself, but believed small private schools, like the one Anna would soon be on her way to visit, were no more insulated. She'd gone to all the parties in her youth. She rarely saw sunlight in those days, sleeping through the afternoons, weaving her way through thumping house parties at night. Once, a fraternity had hosted a Goldfish Party where every man who entered the house had to swallow a live goldfish. Women got in for free. The brothers had an inflatable plastic baby pool positioned at the door, teeming with skittish, perturbed little fish. By the end, the only ones left were the beauties with banner-like fins and tails, the elegant ones who slid down your throat like a silk parade. Mimi took one home and put it in the bathtub, but it was belly up by morning.

She saw a girl's stomach pumped too. The charcoal was black as ink.

"I'll be fine," Anna said, defiant. "I'm good at making friends."

"Oh, friends—they'll be the first to, you know...." She raised her eyebrows suggestively, but Anna refused to react. "To screw you," her mother finished off.

Anna did not believe anything her mother said regarding sex. She lived in what seemed to be a perpetual state panic, constantly imagining the worst eventualities in order to guard against

them, or at least to guard against that psychic disaster commonly known as surprise. She sent Anna emails with portentous subject lines like, “BE CAREFUL” or “This Girl Is Your Age.” They always contained links to articles of dubious origin—fake news sources about young people burning to death after falling asleep with their laptop in bed, for example. Complete with pictures, of course.

Anna liked to believe her mother’s impulses were born out of circumstance. Her husband, Anna’s father, had died suddenly at age 30—a brain aneurism—and Anna’s mother never quite recovered. Such tragedies change a person. That said, Anna didn’t remember much before her father’s death—she’d been too young. Maybe her mom had always been this way, but it suited Anna better to think she hadn’t. It meant Anna came away from her father’s death stronger than her mom, and for some reason that was important. Anna played cinemas of disaster in her mind just as often, but she could shut them off at will. They never compelled her to act, a fact she took pride in.

She rode her bike without a helmet. She walked home from debate practice in the dark alone. She proceeded in her life not as if nothing bad would happen, but as if she could survive it if it did.

~

Anna was going to visit the small college because it was the only private school offering her a scholarship, but it was five states away in a town hours away from any airport. Anna’s mother couldn’t take time off work, but she also could not tolerate the idea of Anna making a connection in Chicago and sitting through an hour-long taxi ride with god knows who. She knew all about that “Midwest Nice.” They’d make small talk about Jell-O salad and Walking Tacos and then

take you out and fuck you in a cornfield. Anna's mom imitated the tune the driver might whistle among the plump green stalks.

Amtrak, on the other hand, ran within 15 feet of campus. The train left in the afternoon directly from Denver's Union Station, and showed up the next morning on the corner of the main quad.

The entry hall of Union Station was cavernous and bright, with white marble tile and refinished mahogany benches. Anna's mom asked what seat she'd been assigned.

"No seat," Anna said.

"No seat assignments? Well then, we'd better get up close so you can have first pick."

Anna looked around the waiting area. Five other people sat reading magazines or slumped in the stiff waiting room chairs. It would hardly be a rush for the door. Nonetheless, when an attendant emerged to open the gate, Anna's mother quickly ushered her up before any of the other passengers even stood.

Anna waved goodbye from the other side, stepped outside to the train platform, and climbed up into the passenger car. She took a window seat and soon the train went sliding through Denver's industrial yards. The warehouses and pyramids of construction materials slipped by like groceries on a conveyer belt. They travelled east and Anna felt her distance from home increase; stretching, straining like a rubber band until, somewhere between the oil refinery stacks of Commerce City, the rubber band snapped. Joyful independence bubbled up from within Anna's belly. If the windows had been able to open, she would have tossed the cooler out into the accelerating landscape right then and there.

Instead she made her way to the observation car to eat the sandwich. The observation car had bigger windows than the rest of the train—they curved upward, kind of like a fishbowl if a

fishbowl were rectangular. Big lounge chairs with squeaky blue vinyl cushions lined the car facing out, punctuated by little booths with bolted down tables. She liked the tiny towns best, like Benkelman, Nebraska, where she saw a woman sunbathing naked in her backyard like no one could see, laundry flapping on the line above her. The thing about trains is that no one wants to look at them. All the houses face away. You don't go gliding through any city centers with charming store fronts—it's all backsides and fire escapes, the trappings of everyday emergencies. Trash cans and overgrown grass, bundles of electrical wire, the dog digging up who knows what.

Anna returned to her seat. At Lincoln, an older boy got on and, seeing most of the other seats taken, asked if he could sit down.

"It's getting cold outside," he said. He offered her a piece of gum, but Anna turned it down. Then, so as not to seem rude, she said it did look pretty cold, even though she'd just been thinking how deep and warm the light seemed at this time of evening. The sun journeyed slowly toward the horizon as they left Lincoln for the stitched and quilted farmlands of eastern Nebraska. Anna watched the little dirt roads between stretches of field zip by.

"Where are you headed?" the boy asked.

Anna told him she was visiting a college, then immediately regretted giving away her age. She should have said she was in college already.

"Oh! What college?" the boy pressed. "I'm going back for school—maybe we're going the same place."

They were not, but he knew people where Anna was visiting. "I know the Sig Chis over there—good guys."



Anna looked quickly and saw he wore a fraternity shirt, although she didn't know the letters. She didn't know anything about fraternities—or sororities for that matter—except that she had been warned against them. Luckily he didn't look clean cut. He was probably a sophomore, or a junior Anna thought nervously. He had a kind, forgettable face with some blonde patchy beard struggling to come in. His jaw worked furiously on the gum.

“Do you drink?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes,” Anna lied, but quickly regretted that too. He reached for his backpack and Anna's mind skipped to him pulling out a beer or those little bottles of vodka sized for airplanes—anyone could bring anything on a train. What if he offered her one? She'd really backed herself into a corner. But he didn't—he only pulled out a rumpled up sweatshirt and wiggled into it, keeping his elbows to himself.

“That's good,” he continued. “I have friends who never drank before college and they got steamrolled. Plus they always try to get the prospies wasted—don't let anyone pressure you.” He smiled and Anna said thanks for the advice, just for something nice to say and to show she appreciated his kindness. They each gradually turned away from each other. Anna put her footrest up and the boy put in earbuds that leaked tinny music. When the sun went down fully, he too put up a foot rest and spread a thin blanket across his lap.

Night slowly fell throughout the train and dull yellow lights flicked on to guide people down the aisles. A communal hush prevailed, ambient and soothing, over the clacking of the tracks. Every once in a while another passenger or the conductor would come padding past and cross through the door at the end of the car. There would be a whoosh as the door opened and for a few seconds you could hear the air outside rushing by and the sound of the train tracks became sharper. Then the door would snap back shut, restoring the quiet.

Some hours into the night, the boy reclined his seat back and readjusted the blanket. A corner of it fell across Anna's leg. She still had her seat up, her hands cupped to the window to watch the dark fields scrolling by. She liked watching for the lonely farmhouses, their islands of cozy light out there in the oceans of wheat and soy and corn. She liked also how distant the train horn sounded. You'd think riding the train would mean hearing the whistle loud and startling every time it called, but no. It sounded miles away, like a forlorn but benign animal beyond Anna's concern, even though it had everything to do with her propulsion forward. Sometimes they passed close enough to houses that she could peer into the lighted windows and see couches, paintings, or dining room tables like little dollhouse dioramas.

She thought about moving the blanket off her leg, but she didn't want to disturb the boy and, truthfully, it was thrilling to have him so close. She imagined his knee drifting over to her side of the seats. This was the type of thing she often dreamed of. She could stare at the forearms of boys in her class, the hands clutching pencils, or even at men—teachers, neighbors—and imagine the air pressed out of chest by their weight. She longed to be caught in their gaze, spotlighted, reduced, illuminated. She felt sick for touch. She tried kissing the shower door for practice, but the shower door never kissed back. Once, she remembered, a girl in her cabin at summer camp had been pulled into the costume closet by Mack Lovorn. She had emerged flushed and beaming and told them humbly how Mack pinned her arms on the wall above. The other girls pressed eagerly for more details and Anna smiled along, all the while feeling an urgent chasm of need yawning open below her.

But what if it was his knee? Or his hand? Anna flexed the foot of the leg the blanket had fallen on and contracted the muscles in her calf, her thigh. The blanket felt warm. What if it was? She felt a light pressure on her thigh and suddenly a cold wash ran up her neck. It was; it was his

hand, or rather his fingertips, resting lightly on her leggings. Maybe he'd fallen asleep. She dared a sidelong glance at his profile and saw his eyes were closed, his head back, but he still chewed the gum, slowly now, in contemplation. Not asleep.

Anna remained as still as she could, suddenly horrified by the possibilities before her. She couldn't even give a name to those possibilities, her consciousness was so consumed by the contact of his hand and the tenseness of her leg. Her foot, rooted to the floor, felt outsized with the effort of steeling each toe and tiny muscle into perfect motionlessness.

*Excuse me*, she wanted to say, but turned her face to the glass instead. *Please stop*, she thought to herself. His hand splayed out so more than just the fingertips touched. It was his whole palm. She could get up and go to the bathroom, remove herself without saying anything, but climbing over his outstretched legs to the aisle beyond seemed like scaling a treacherous ledge. It would embarrass them both.

More than that, though, Anna felt again the enormous distance from home, felt herself duplicated and one self plucked neatly from the other, felt the train at once hurtling forward and rocking gently, and she thought, why not? What will happen? A question she wondered often when faced with decisions of uncertain consequence while no one was watching.

Years later, she will be very good at being vulnerable. She will learn that vulnerability is a powerful tool; that most people, when offered what they believe is a delicate truth, will not drop it. Rather, they respond in kind. This is called falling in love. Anna will leave many people having put them in such a state.

In the train, it was impenetrably dark and this created the comfortable illusion of being insulated. Anna could hear the gentle heavy breathing of the overweight man asleep in the row behind, but couldn't see him. The seatbacks in front of her were wide and tall, and the window

reflected transparent versions of the lines and objects within the car. Taken all together, Anna felt perfectly contained, like her existence was a potent secret. To think: back in Centennial she was a girl on the all-state Debate Team. As far as anyone knew, she was somewhere whooshing through the Midwest asleep with her mouth open.

The boy's hand was patient but persistent. Over the next several miles he began a journey from her knee to the inside of her thigh and up toward the crease between her hip and leg. She kept her legs rigid and leaned slightly away, her shoulders toward the window and chin in hand to show she was absorbed in the scenery. The hand pressed lightly on the inside of her thigh, a request to relax toward him, a carefully composed argument, but she would not. He insisted.

The moon was nearly full with only a thin sliver missing, barely deformed, and it bathed the cornfields in blue. The faraway lights of little towns with crisscrossed streets floated by in the distance. The hand moved further up and squeezed gently. She would not, but finally she did. He explored the waistband of her leggings, sliding first one finger then two between the elastic and her skin. He ran the fabric between his fingers and thumb like feeling a fine bolt of cloth and his knuckles slid one two three over the sharp curve of her hip bone. Anna still faced the window but now her legs were torqued slightly so her body was diagonal, leaning in, leaning away. The hand advanced further, across her belly, to the edge of her underwear, further, further.

The contours of the fields dipped and swelled, swerved near then darted far, rolling, plunging, scrolling, rising. They crossed the silt-filled depths of the Missouri River. Dull light from the moon turned sharp, glinted on the surface of its snaking waters, the kinks and curves, the bottom black and overflowing.

The boy's hand plunged bravely. Anna felt shame, yes, so sick with that same need from which her dreams grew, her stomach turning, her head floating away. They approached a town and went sliding across an empty street, wide and abandoned to the night. The railroad crossing lights blinked red into the train car's cabin, bells dinging with increasing urgency as they neared, bursting, then fading away in increments. The train blew a breathy whistle at once rich and utterly forlorn.

The conductor came up the dark aisle passing his fingers along the overhead runner stuck with tickets. He stopped at each seat with a pink ticket and stirred the corresponding passenger. "Mount Pleasant," he murmured. He stopped at the boy's seat. "Mount Pleasant, sir. We've arrived at your destination."

The boy quietly gathered his things. Anna pretended to be asleep, but she stole one final glance in spite of herself. It surprised her to see how rumpled, how unattractive he actually was. He stood taller than she thought, and had a beak-like nose with a bland Midwestern mouth.

"Good luck," he mouthed, catching her looking at him. He took his backpack and walked off down the aisle. But good luck with what? She wonders this now walking into the fresh new morning of another relationship ended. So many men tell her she allows them to be the man they always wished they could be. Good luck, that boy wished her, but she makes her own luck. She can spot disaster from miles away.

## LOST & FOUND

We didn't have any trouble until after the show, after we'd loaded up the drum kit and amps, after Matthew decided to snort enough coke to kill a small animal. No trouble really until Olivia showed up—Olivia with her sweet bluegrass voice, her breathy harmonies.

It was a good one—the show I mean. We crashed the van on the way there and it woke Matthew up, the way terrible things do. He stood outside while we waited for a tow truck to haul our sorry asses from a ditch, fat snowflakes whipping up against his hair, gathering on his pea-coat. When I told him to get back in the car he said, “No way, Danny, it's like the Milky Way out here. It's too perfect.” Which is something he would say, something he would do on the side of I-90 in a snowstorm, where you can't see anything except patches of road every couple of miles beneath the highway lamps. We were two hours late for load-in, but people ate it up. Maybe making a crowd stand around packed like sardines at a grimy club in Madison is the key to being loved. Or maybe it was hiring Josh the Twitter guy. Either way, finally it seemed someone had noticed us, or noticed Matthew at least.

Taking the mic, he apologized for the delay and thanked everyone for showing up. Matthew could speak to a roomful of people the way he'd look a best friend in the eye—which is to say: 100% present, no bullshit. On stage in his too-tight jeans, soft around the middle like he'd always been, sweating already—his method of performance landed somewhere between manic and earnest, like every time he took the stage lives were at stake.

“I want you all to know,” Matthew said, his voice buzzy over the amplifier, “being here tonight means something because we’re here together. Life is short and there’s enough hate—we don’t need that. Man, any second your van could run off the road, and that could be it. What we need is to love each other!”

The audience cheered, flashed phone lights, raised their beers. Our drummer Kevin counted off and we tore into our single, a song Matthew wrote about getting bullied. Or at least that’s what I know it’s about. You wouldn’t be able to tell unless you knew him as a fat kid in high school with no chin, crying quiet in the gym locker room. He used to get pushed around all the time. Back then I tried to be his savior, but only in private. I don’t think I ever stood up for him publicly; then again, he never asked me to.

A blogger back home in Chicago wrote a review of our first LP, on which the single appeared. *Lovers of revelatory lyrics take note, the guy wrote. On their debut effort, indie rock band Lost & Found turns in a twelve-song set steeped in heady introspection, built on open air guitar and hard-driving melodies. The band’s most popular track, “History Down Below,” unleashes waves of measured ferocity over the turbine strumming of bassist Daniel Blackman. This album’s true triumph, however, is capturing the spirit of front man Matt Mackay’s live performances, an experience endowed with all the heft and power of a backroom confession.*

That review probably played more of a role than we liked to admit in filling the once empty bars we started out playing. But whatever—the point is, we had a song that moved. It felt and sounded like a boulder rolling downhill. It got people pumped (at least, when there were more than a few of them in the room), and this night was no exception. In the half light of the oblong room beyond the stage, all those bodies moved like a single animal. All except for the girl, Olivia.

I'd say it was hard not to notice her since she stood front row, but honestly I never look at people on the floor. It's something I know Matthew can do—he's always everywhere and nowhere at once, with everyone and with himself—but I'm only ever one place. I didn't even see her until the end. She stood still with her arms crossed, hair as long as mine (but cleaner—everything about her cleaner than me) and made eye contact. I guess after that I just couldn't stop looking.

Matthew couldn't either—he took her backstage after the encore, after almost everyone else had emptied out and he found her in the alley with wooly gloves on, smoking a cigarette. I stopped getting in his way a long time ago when it came to girls—I figured I owed him at least that much. All he ever wanted was to be one of the cool kids.

But then an hour or so later Olivia ran to get me and showed me Matthew, pale and convulsing on the floor of the dressing room. His heart rate was probably triple what a normal human being could reasonably take. I saw the remains of a few more lines he must have been in the middle of parsing out.

“Jesus,” I said, too panicked to think straight. “What do we do?”



“I already called 911—I don’t know what else there is,” Olivia lamented, burying her hand in her hair and clutching it there.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” What I really meant to say was why didn’t *I* stop him.

“I assumed he knew what he was doing,” she said. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck.”

We held him down for something to do with our hands. He shook, fish or messiah-like. I half expected him to open his eyes, start speaking in tongues (this, that, or the other thing about prophesying eternal forgiveness), and then say, “Gotcha, assholes!” It’s something he would do, but he didn’t. Instead his t-shirt got damp where I pressed down—his sweat or mine—and the room smelled like those laser tag mazes from when we were kids, that musty fog-machine smell. It was just the leftover air of the concert spreading out, dissipating, but it reminded me of winning against Matthew. Stupid laser tag might have been the last thing I was better at than him. It made me want him to live, but also not.

~

Olivia came with us to the hospital—us being me, Kevin, and Kim, our keyboardist and sometimes violin player. I met Kim in school, before dropping out to join Matthew, who never bothered with college at all. She could wail on the keys and what’s more, seemed impervious to Matthew’s lost-dog-charm and my advances, which I admit I made early on. Once we got that out of the way, though, we became good friends. She kept us, Matthew and I both, honest. She pushed the music. Now she stood tapping her foot absently, facing the hollow red glow of a Coca-Cola vending machine and leaning her head on its front periodically. Kevin on the other hand looked like someone waiting for a late bus in soggy weather. He was a jobber, and his

paycheck didn't cover hospital waiting rooms. I gave him 6 months, a year tops, before he split.

Olivia sat next to me.

Compared to the winter dark outside, the fluorescent lighting in that room could probably have x-rayed our insides. It felt offensive, invasive. People came and went, some of them bleeding, but nothing much seemed to change. I could have sworn the same guy sat across from us all night, except when we first got there he was a black dude wearing white Adidas and by morning I realized he was a white guy wearing black Reeboks. I felt drunk.

At some point we decided to get hotel rooms, so Kim and Kevin left to go searching. I told Olivia she could leave too if she wanted.

"No, I'll stay," she said.

"That's sweet of you, but really you should go," I told her. "This might seem noble right now, but if he wakes up and you're still around he's going to love you. And I don't mean like he'll appreciate you for doing him a favor. He falls hard. I don't think you want that—trust me."

"Maybe that's not what I'm staying for," she said.

We didn't talk much more about it, but I kept looking at her. I kept seeing her oval face, wide flat lips, the way she tugged absently at an eyelid when she didn't have anything else to do. I'm not sure what she saw of me, but I guess that's the deal you strike. Love is blind, and I don't mean in the sense that anyone can love anyone. I mean each person only has their own head. I mean it's one sided no matter how transcendent.

A nurse came out sometime around 5:00 and told us Matthew was stable, sleeping, they would call when he woke up if we wanted to go get some sleep. Kim had sent me the hotel address so I called a cab and Olivia led the way to the car's back seat. The ice-dawn air clung to

our hair for a few minutes after getting in—I could feel it coming off Olivia like a thin second skin. I’ve never been so aware of my body’s proximity to another. Her shoulder six inches from mine, her foot just the other side of that rise in the car floor.

She told me about being a grad student in anthropology, her dissertation still a long agonizing year away, something on Morocco and borderlands, gendered politics maybe. Forgive me if I can’t remember, but she said herself it didn’t matter.

“When I started I thought it was for passion, you know? To fulfill my life’s purpose. But really I just thought I’d be good at it. Turns out there are a lot of people who are better.”

At the hotel we wasted no time. I took her shirt off. She put her hands in my hair so her fingers met at the back of my head, tangled in the hair tie and bun. She kissed my mouth and neck, along the edge of my beard. She tasted earthy like black tea and cigarettes. Into my ear she breathed, “At least people listen to your stuff.”

“Do they?” I asked. She laughed, but I was serious. I was hungry in a way I think she recognized. Hungry and selfish.

“Well, I do,” she said.

My stomach did something—bottomed out or flipped or disappeared. I don’t know. It could have been the last of my performance high kicking back up, or ghost vibrations of bass thrumming through my finger pads. Maybe it came from tasting the salt of my own dry sweat on her lips, or having seen Matthew on a gurney. Wherever it came from, the feeling was real and immediate. I thought for a long time love had to grow, that it came at the expense of naiveté, a hard-won realization unfolded over the course of many years. Never in a night, never in a low-grade hotel room with plastic lamps and a comforter sporting 1980’s pop designs. Everything smelled a little like crayons. I didn’t care at all.

The hospital called a few hours later to say Matthew woke up and could go home. I left Olivia in the bed smoking a cigarette, naked except for a wool hat. She had the window open to blow smoke out, but the sub-zero breeze kept pushing it back in. It churned circles above the radiator.

“So this is goodbye,” she said, taking a drag.

I should have left it there—an easy out—but god I just couldn’t. “Why don’t you come to Chicago sometime?” I suggested.

~

Back in the city, we unloaded equipment from the van curbside to haul it up Kim’s apartment stairwell. Why the person with a third floor walk-up had to be the only one with enough room to store our heaviest shit is a cruelty of the universe I still can’t get over. Cars idled through the street slush and the Chicago iron curtain, that opaque layer of formless clouds present from October through March, was in top form. It gave the afternoon a quality of trapped light, like an incandescent bulb dimmed down. Matthew stood to the side, still looking a little bloodless. Snow, too small to really call flakes, fell and stuck to his eyelashes.

“So, Dan,” he said as I returned to the van for another load. “Kim said that girl stuck around last night.”

I shot Kim a look as we both reached for an amp. The way she layered mascara and eyeliner, the way she made the line between skin and matte black look natural, gave her an air of authority. She remained unapologetic.

“Yeah, she did,” I said, aware of my gaze, avoiding Matthew.

“So?” he asked.

“So what? Nothing happened, dude—” I slapped him on the shoulder going by, which his body absorbed like an inanimate object.

In the stairwell, dripping snot from our noses, Kim told me not to be a dick.

~

As kids, Matthew and I started out lip syncing to Collective Soul in my mom’s basement. We planned sleepovers to coincide with new top ten lists on VH1. I remember waiting outside Vic’s Music Store overnight in sleeping bags and lawn chairs, our cheeks going numb, for a meet-and-greet with Billy Corgan.

When we got to high school, I joined the track team whereas Matthew got a guitar. He carried it around everywhere, wore it on his back through the halls, brought it to class where the teachers told him to put it in the corner. He’d ignore them and lean it against the back of his chair. I alone heard him play licks over and over, over and over, to perfection—he’d choke if anyone else came around. But just the two of us, on weekends after my meets, could play for hours—him on a brand new Yamaha he picked up with money from a summer stocking job at Vic’s; me on my dad’s old Fender acoustic. I used to back him with harmonies, although when Matthew finally got over his stage fright and we started playing publicly, he suggested maybe it wasn’t our sound. Maybe Lost & Found would be cleaner with just one man on vocals. He generally had a better sense than I did, musically at least. Socially I had him beat, at least for a little while.

“Why don’t people like me?” he asked once. I’d seen some older guys in his face earlier that day, keeping him from getting to class. I remember he had books clutched to his chest, head down, the guitar banging hollow against his locker door.

“Come on, Mattie, people like you,” I assured him. He kept tuning his guitar, twanging it in upward increments. “I mean, just be a little more confident.”

I invited him to a party with guys I knew on the track team. This was summer in southern Illinois, where the heat felt as heavy as our restlessness, our belief in its inherent value. We spoke loudly and piled into cars with the windows down, stole cases of watery beer. The competition to act like you had already left home was silent but ever-present.

Of course as soon as we got to the party no one wanted to be there—some of the guys suggested going for a drive and I agreed, stupid already with a buzz and warmth spreading from that point between my shoulder blades. Matthew hesitated but came along, guitar in tow.

There were five of them and two of us and Matthew half sat on top of me to make room for everyone else, curling his soft body around the guitar case. Everyone kept their arms squeezed, trying not to touch, and it smelled like skin and the vapor of cheap vodka. We drove out from the neighborhood into the dark outskirts, onto county roads running razor straight between lightless cornfields. We passed over a covered one-lane bridge, the damp wood of its decades old housing sliding past our elbows hooked out the windows. We came out the other side and I remember the car lurching, or maybe it was my head, but suddenly hands had the guitar and they were tugging it away from Matthew. “Get it fucking out of here,” everyone seemed to be shouting, drunk and angry at him for being weak. It tumbled out the window and he struggled to follow, reaching frantically for the door handle, but there were so many arms and heads and shoulders.

The car came to an abrupt stop. I don't remember anyone saying anything but the whole group seemed to have the same idea, like fish who change direction all at once. They tugged Matthew out, his shirt coming up over his head to reveal his white belly, his curved back. They went after him, and so did I. I mean, at first I meant to just fight, throw some elbows like in a good mosh pit, but then I don't know what happened. The night was muggy and dark enough to make us feel far away. There was gravel from the road's shoulder in my palms and knees and I remember looking away for a second to see dust floating through the headlights of the idling car. I looked back and saw Matthew's face swim up between two guys and I took a swing, and I connected. Until that point no one had really thrown any punches. It had been all shoving and wrestling, grabbing, pulling; then suddenly Matthew recoiled into a ball on the ground. Everyone backed off. The sound of the cicadas came back up and below that, Matthew's soft sobs. That was the first time he made me feel like an animal, like I could be better.

Someone walked back to get his guitar, but it was only a gesture—the neck had snapped, the body cracked.

~

Olivia called me a couple weeks after the Madison show—winter break she said. Although it didn't mean much for a PhD's workload, she had a free weekend coming up and saw Lost & Found on the bill for a show Friday. My head felt full of lo-fi static. "Sure," I said. "Come to Chicago," I said.

We had a standing gig Thursday nights at a bar on the south side. Kim's family friend owned it and stocked the décor with strange Americana memorabilia—photos of John Wayne,

American flags painted in distressed relief on panels of wood. It seemed like a dirty enough place to tell Matthew. Elbowed up at the bar with him waiting for our set, I broached the subject. “Remember that girl from a few weeks ago?” I started out. Matthew’s face fell at the initial telling, but he covered with bluster. “Nice work, brother! Of course she can stay with us.” He ordered another whiskey on the rocks for both of us. It was still early, the bar empty except for the usual regulars, patron saints of lonely dives. I guess no one wanted to foot the 75 cents for a jukebox song so the atmosphere was all pint glass clinks and low conversation. It seemed to me Matthew took his whiskey a little fast.

“Hey,” I asked him. “Do you remember that time in high school we went to Todd Miller’s party? We ended up out at that bridge?”

For some reason right then I needed to know if he realized it was me who hit him that night. He’d never said anything about it, we’d never talked about it. Now he tipped the last of his drink back, ice and all, crunching on the cubes. He thought.

“Listen, Danny, do I want God to exist? Yes. Do I know he does? No. We might just die and that’s it, you know? The earth will be consumed by the sun and everything—I mean the Bible, Qur’an, Torah, Dylan, the Stones, Hemingway, all our memories—everything will disappear. Everything we’re making here. I do what I can to live a life with what might be, but it doesn’t mean I stop hoping. I still want God to exist. I like to think somewhere, maybe in another dimension, there’s a place with infinite mercy.”

What are you supposed to say to a thing like that? Nothing, that’s what. Matthew could do this, go full philosophical, abstract the shit out of a situation and make it seem noble. To a



certain degree it's the trick he turned on stage, and people fell into his orbit like they finally had gravity, trajectory. He'd figured out how to look like he had everything figured out. But I'd known him for too long. "It's me," I sometimes wanted to say. "You don't have to put on the act."

The next day I went out for groceries—frozen pizza, cans of baked beans, pasta, the usual bachelor garbage Matthew and I ate—but I procrastinated too long and got stuck in the grey holiday season gridlock on Western. Olivia texted she had arrived and Matthew let her in. When I finally made it back, I entered to the familiar sound of Matthew strumming out a Bob Dylan song, but then another voice, Olivia's, joined him. I paused in the entryway, one shoe on, one shoe off. The two of them sounded unsure at first, tugging each other into different registers, but then Olivia locked in. The sound filled out. She brought something silver and longing, a bluegrass sweetness, to Matthew's straightforward timbre.

"Bravo!" I said coming into our small living room. "I didn't know you could sing." My chest caught at seeing her again. She had her hair pulled into a loose knot, two layers of sweaters, one leg crossed beneath the other on our ratty couch. She looked just as striking, but smaller, less resolute, among our unwashed dishes and empty cans of Miller High Life on the coffee table.

"Did you hear that?" Matthew asked. He was genuinely excited. "This is what we're missing, man! This is the missing link."

I tried to extinguish my twinge of hurt—one man vocals my ass.

“Yeah, it’s really something,” I said, summoning some charm, smiling. “Take it easy though—don’t scare her off.” I winked at Olivia, but it felt like a put on, skeezier than I meant for it to come off. She humored me anyway and smiled back. “Who wants a beer?” I asked.

~

The show that night should have been just as packed as Madison, but when we got there the place had a distinct small-time feel, and not because of the venue itself. No, compared to what we’d been playing this place looked like the United Center, with its designated green room and rig of lighting hanging from the ceiling. But the bartender had no one to serve; the pre-show music played to a largely empty room, pods of two and three people scattered across the black sticky floor. I swear I heard the sound guy play “I Want Pizza,” from that internet video with the Olson twins. I wandered out front and the ticket guys stood huddled around a phone, scrolling through something they both laughed at, the screen glow lending clouds of their breath a spectral illumination. Assholes, I wanted to say, but they had nothing to do with it. Our name in lights on the marquee above had been spelled without the ampersand—Lost *and* Found.

In the green room, Matthew looked rattled. “These fuckers said they’d advertise—what the fuck happened?”

“It’s still early, don’t worry,” Kim tried to reassure us, herself included. “This isn’t a big deal. It’ll start filling up once we go on.”

“Wilco’s at the Vic tonight—maybe they stole our crowd,” Kevin said. He sat hunched over a practice pad sticking out warm up exercises. LRRLR RLLRL. He wore sunglasses—I

moved up my estimation for his departure to a month and got tired just thinking about it. I couldn't stand auditioning new people—that first date feel, the coy investigations on both sides. Who's more serious here? Could we make each other famous?

"I don't get it—Dog Zero sold out at the Empty Bottle tonight," Matthew lamented. We knew the Dog Zero guys from a year or so ago, when we opened with them on equal footing. Now they had a record deal and a hundred thousand views on YouTube. They had an interview coming up on *Sound Opinions*. "We're better than them," Matthew asserted.

The show was a mess. More people filtered in slowly, but the headcount hit its limit with our opener and paranoia convinced me a few people even left during the set change. The illusion of success leftover from Madison quickly folded and vanished. Looking out, there could have been continents between each person on the floor and somewhere in the middle of those continents stood Olivia. When I found her outline, stage left sipping a beer, I started a song off in the wrong key. Later, Matthew botched the melody line of "Too Much, Too Late." We finally settled down three quarters of the way through and by the time we hit "History" as our closer, we seemed to have some of the magic back, although Matthew's voice kept falling forward, rushing, a millisecond jump beyond Kevin's time. I'll just say it was a relief to skip the encore.

Olivia found me backstage and said emphatically she thought it went great. I couldn't tell if she was humoring me or not. In any case, she suggested going to an after party of sorts. She'd chatted up one of the lighting technicians during the show, a mid-forties former rocker with sideburns and comfortable potbelly, and he invited us back to his place. Matthew took two shots in quick succession and said he didn't want to go, but I pushed until he relented. "Come on, walk it off," I told him.

The tech's apartment was unexpectedly spacious, with exposed brick walls and two different dartboards. A floor-to-ceiling shelf of vinyl occupied one corner of the open layout. The Chicago underground appeared alive and well here—lots of black pants, leather jackets, beanies, sizing each other up. I got cornered almost immediately in the kitchen by an overeager blonde kid who described his band as “shoegazey.” He kept sweeping his bangs to the side and then shaking them back in place.

“You’re the bass player from Lost & Found, aren’t you?” he said. “Your front man is really something—I dig his positivity. Matt Mackenzie, right? Is he here?”

“Mackay,” I corrected. “He’s around somewhere.” I looked and spotted him across the breakfast bar counter, settling in on the living room couch with someone’s borrowed guitar and, who else, Olivia. I shouldn’t have been surprised, but still my gut kicked. He started playing the Dylan song from earlier, and when Olivia joined in the room became perceptibly quieter. I wondered why the hell she ever went into anthropology.

They played for quite a while, looking up lyrics for other songs on their phones, while I kept drinking with Shoegaze and a rotating cast of others. Finally I made an extra vodka tonic and walked it over to Olivia. I tried to make the interruption natural, then turned my attention to Matthew. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

We exited to the fire escape, leaving Olivia full-faced and lovely on the couch. Neither of us had coats and the night’s freeze hit my liquor numb head with snappy force. I tripped on the metal platform. The sudden jolt and hollow reverberation of iron steps made me inexplicably angry and I used it as an excuse, though I felt I didn’t need one, to pick a fight.

“The fuck are you doing?”

“What do you mean what am I doing? She has a good voice,” he said. He’d stripped down to a white short sleeved undershirt and clutched his arms around his chest. He wore a flat brimmed baseball cap, which didn’t make any sense for December. It had started to snow again, but wetly, halfway to sleet. The orangish window light from apartment buildings up and down the block looked fractured and dull.

“You think you’re better than me,” I said. “You really do.”

“Oh okay, look who’s pointing fingers. I’ve always been a friend to you, Danny. Can you really say the same?”

“Bullshit—I’ve been taking care of you since fucking sixth grade. You needed me and I was there.”

“Oh, thank God! Everyone, Danny is here to save the day! Because poor sad Matthew can’t take care of himself.”

“I let you get the girl all the time,” I said. “What if I really like this one, what then?”

“Let me? *Let* me? Fuck you, Danny. I can’t believe this—I’m tired of you treating me like a little brother. We’re not in some competition. I don’t need your pity win.”

A hot sensation bloomed across the back of my neck. “Matt, Matthew, I didn’t mean—”

“No,” he said, “You know what? You can take your charity and shove it up your ass.”

Just then the door to the fire escape opened and Olivia’s face poked through. She looked buoyant at first, but quickly recomposed, becoming cautious. “Do you guys—does anyone need a drink?” she asked. Matthew and I stood damp and shivering, dark patches of wet expanding on our shirts from our shoulders down. I became suddenly aware of how searing cold my hands felt,

and how quickly, icily, the snow hit my skin and melted. We were just a couple of freezing, sodden pathetics.

Matthew took the chance to shoulder past Olivia and disappear. By the time I gathered the nerve to go back in, a matter of 10 or 15 minutes later, Olivia had gone. She sent me a cryptic message an hour or so later: “Had to bail—thanks for the show.” Matthew didn’t talk to me. I spent the rest of the night downing whiskey, and when whiskey ran out I took gin. I didn’t see when Matthew or the others left, so around four in the morning I started walking home, trying weakly to hail each passing cab. By then a solid coat of ice encased everything—sidewalk, streets, building walls—in a glassy shell. The naked branches of trees clacked together in the wind. I slip-walked probably half a mile before a cab finally stopped.

On the ride home, I watched a car ahead of us pirouette slowly through an intersection. There seemed to be hazard lights flashing everywhere, filling up the cab interior with translucent yellow, then not, then yellow, then not. “Oh jeez,” the driver said, his windshield wipers working mechanically against the freeze. *Koosh koosh* they went. My ears felt stuffed with cotton balls.

~

Suffice it to say I blew it with Olivia. She never sang with us—with Matthew—again, and I still don’t know where she went that night. What I do know is that Matthew came into my room the next morning with coffee, some kind of hot drink he called super tea, and two guitars. He turned the heat way up and opened the blinds so we could see Chicago still frozen. I started to sweat.

“You need to get the toxins out,” Matthew said, and handed me a guitar as he sat down on the edge of the bed. He acted like nothing had happened, bless him. I thought about saying something, but my head throbbed and my body felt alien. All I wanted was for him to stay, for his weight, his familiar presence, to depress the corner of my mattress. He started picking the intro to a song we wrote in high school, something I assumed he’d lost track of if only because I’d forgotten it myself.

“Let’s play some music,” he said, and coaxed me into it, nodding out the down beats.

## WE RUN TO THE DESERT

Charlie stands on the steps of the camper trailer in nothing but socks and boxers. He runs a hand through flattened hair and surveys what's ours today: the backside of a gas station with dry dirt splattered up the stucco, faint hum of the highway 10 or 15 miles back. You'd think it was wind if wind could exist in the vacuum of this sunrise. Octagon-patterned cracks in the desert mud for miles. Ahead, just within eyesight, low mountains interrupt the basin valley, and beyond that the invisible border between here and New Mexico.

We stole the trailer from Charlie's dad last night—hushing each other, leaving the break light cables unplugged and headlights off until we idled silently out of the neighborhood—because, as Charlie put it, we each deserved a goddamn vacation. He was tired of being the former-math-whiz turned college dropout, employed only by the grace of his father's electrical company. And me? I took what one might call an emotional dive after working briefly for a conspiracy theorist who wanted to write a book. His name was Nathan Borghia and he claimed to know about many terrible things, just nothing about grammar or spelling. I should have recognized neurosis when I saw it, but I had just graduated and needed a job. When he first



called back about my resume, Mr. Borghia struck me as organized, professional, and forthright. He'd already written a contract—6 month commitment, 40 hours per week, with a gag order clause.

“What will I be writing?” I'd asked.

“What I tell you to, Sarah,” he said. “It's a big story, really one to knock your socks off. Your eyes will fall out of your head. Got a thick skin? I was hoping for a man, but a girl will do fine if you can handle it.”

“What's the story about again?”

“I can't say until you've signed the contract. And then you can't say either.”

He lived in a third floor apartment down the street from an outdoor concert venue. Sometimes when the shows let out, he'd stand at his window watching hundreds of kids stream out the gates, drunk, rolling, tripping, or stoned. He'd cluck his tongue and thumb a pendant of St. Christopher. “I've been there,” he would say. “There but by the grace of God go I again.”

~

Charlie and I now drive south on I-25 with our phones off—me to avoid calls from Mr. Borghia, Charlie to avoid calls from his dad. Somewhere in Denver a circuit of lights won't turn on, but Charlie is blissfully unaware. I'm driving. Charlie has his feet on the dashboard and a slim book on mathematical theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every once in a while he looks up and points out the symmetry of certain saguaro cacti.

“Did you know,” he asks a few miles outside Albuquerque, “There's a type of broccoli that grows as a fractal? It has a perfect repetition of multiple spirals, and the whole head of broccoli is a spiral itself, so every floret presents the same logarithmic spiral as the whole.”

What he means to say, I think, is that everything operates according to a higher rule, that we develop and exist under invisible laws. He's just too literal to make the leap. It's a good thing we never tried dating. We've known each other three or four years now and have remained, staunchly, good friends. I met Charlie at the tail end of a disastrous college relationship in which I was the vessel and the man I loved was the water. I encouraged him (the man), once, to let loose and cry a little. After that he never seemed to stop. When Charlie came along, I thought I'd try not loving him, and found it made everything infinitely easier.

100 miles past Albuquerque, our old Chevy sighs in an ugly way and the needle on the gas gauge drops unexpectedly. By some luck, Charlie spots what looks like a tiny chapel out-of-the-blue in the desert just off the highway. I swerve for the exit and we coast to within a hundred yards of the chapel's gravel driveway before the Chevy comes to a breathy halt. A couple of dusty trucks sit in the parking lot.

"Well, there must be someone here who can help," I say, but Charlie gives me an uneasy glance. He knows this: I encounter strange situations often, or they encounter me, like a divining rod to water. "You're the one who saw it," I point out. "What else are we supposed to do?"

He has no answer for that, so he gets out of the truck and walks the rest of the way to the little church, silhouettes of crosses cut into its wooden front doors. A few minutes later he brings back a bearded guy in a minister's collar with cutoff sleeves. This man introduces himself as Father Shash. It means bear in Navajo, he explains.

"Out of gas, huh?" he says. "Don't worry, I keep a couple gallons on hand—God brings me many children like you." But I get the feeling this isn't true—God brings him no children, and it's lonely business, this desert proselytizing. He looks grateful to have some company. "Won't you join us for the service?" he continues. "We're just finishing up—it won't be long."

Inside, the air feels so dry it might go up in flames, but a rattling portable unit keeps it cool enough to be just short of unbearable. A couple of other attendees sit next to each other on a bench in the first row, and one guy reclines on the floor in front of the altar, hands behind his head, napping.

Father Shash starts his sermon, or ends it I guess. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies.” The napping worshipper lets rip a snore that tapers off into a whimper, as if he heard Father Shash’s proclamation and found it at once the stupidest and most profound thing he’d ever heard. Father Shash gestures to him gently.

“Take Tom—he’s fighting to bring a new irrigation line to his property. His cattle have nothing to drink. But he puts his faith in the Spirit. He knows the Lord has not forgotten him, has not forgotten any of us. Amen.”

~

The story Mr. Borghia wanted me to transcribe involved a police cover-up regarding a serial killer in the eighties. His apartment had tables upon tables of cardboard boxes, filing cabinets full of carefully slotted papers, everything labeled appropriately. *Court Records, Golden, CO, 1984; Receipts, Vegas, June 1985; County Maps, Colorado; County Maps, Florida; County Maps, Nevada; Testimony—Abner through Daniels, 1986; Testimony—Eaglin through Johnson, 1986; Photographs.*

I wasn’t supposed to open anything without his supervision. We went through each box and cabinet together, one by one, chronologically revealing with meticulous specificity every

autobiographical detail, every court testimony, every step and misstep regarding the life and sins of another man. I had no idea what of his story was true and what was delusion. He seemed prone to crusading, and this project—the stacks and stacks of papers, the piling up of facts, the subtle turns of interpretation he took—this was his final and most important mission. I got the feeling that, once we finished, he would be so completely empty it would kill him.

I kept to the gag order, except for talking to Charlie. We'd meet for coffee on Sundays and I'd tell him the latest development. I didn't worry about him spreading the information—he had too much faith in causation and order, in one number after another. The idea of senseless murder, the spectacle of it, didn't attract him the way it does most people. No, he read books about pure mathematics. He folded paper origami animals. He smoked too much weed. I on the other hand kept obsessing over womens' heads being lopped off and left in a field. Charlie once offered his rational assessment of my situation, leaning carefully over his cup of espresso.

"I'll tell you what I think, Sarah. You're working for a psychopath obsessed with a psychopath."

"No way," I countered. "Aren't psychopaths emotionless? This guy has enough feelings for the both of us—he's really invested. I mean he really believes in justice, with a capital J. Plus I've seen him cry."

"That's fucked up," Charlie said, and pulled out a Sudoku workbook.

One day, Mr. Borghia left me to proofread some notes while he took a nap in the other room. As soon as he disappeared my eyes landed on the box labeled "Photographs," left conspicuously on the kitchen table. I don't know what compelled me to open it, except that maybe everyone has a penchant for what they know will unhinge them.

I slid the box top off. With a hiss of cardboard on cardboard, I found page upon page of 8x10 photos separated neatly into tabbed folders labeled with the names of girls. Eleven altogether. With a slow sickening at the bottom of my stomach, I saw the name on the first folder—Elisa J. Borghia, 1971-1987. In spite of myself, I pulled a photo out and stared at the clean contrast of the picture's black and white composition, at the sharp angle of her cracked femur, at the velvet black pool of blood leaking out beneath a battered head. It looked like the most horrendous image you could tease out of a Rorschach test. I placed the photo on the table and leaned over it on my elbows with head in hands.

"That's my daughter," Mr. Borghia said suddenly from the doorway. I started, caught in the act, and whipped around to face him. "Was my daughter," he corrected. Years of chewing tobacco had rotted his teeth until he required premature dentures, which he now held in a glass of water. They grinned from their seltzer bath while his lips caved softly inward.

"Mr. Borghia, I'm sorry. I should have waited—"

"Shut up. You know something? They pretend it doesn't happen."

I noticed the blunt thudding of my heart—Mr. Borghia was a volatile man. I could never tell if or when he'd swing from one mood to another, and now I sensed him slipping toward wrath. I tried to shift his focus away from my transgression. "Who do you mean?" I asked. "The police?"

"No, everyone—everyone except me, and now you. That's what this is all about. You think you want to know what happened? Sit the fuck down and I'll tell you."

He started by saying October 20, 1987, he found his daughter dead. This was right after his wife left them. He said there had been a thin layer of snow that morning, that it made his joints ache, so he skipped work to get a fix. He went on a particularly furious bender and stayed

gone long past when his teenage daughter came home from school. By the time he returned, there was no saving her.

They never charged anyone, but Mr. Borghia said he knew without a doubt who murdered his girl. Earlier that same day, there had been a botched prison transfer, during which this man, whose lifetime of cruelties we studied, simply slipped away. Somehow someone looked down or up or anywhere but at him, and he just walked into a stand of pine trees and scuffed over his tracks. The police couldn't have a murder as a result of their incompetence. They just couldn't. And so.

Mr. Borghia started to say how he went in the busted front door and then out the back screen door, ripped and half off its hinges, and how she lay crooked in the frost on the ground. She was the most beautiful thing, even then, he said, even as he saw her skin go blue.

I stood up then. That was enough. I could ingest the rest of what he told me, the facts and figures and court records of brutality, and I could endure the sometimes nightmarish dreams they gave me, but I didn't want to hear about his daughter. I didn't want his 25 years of grief.

"What am I paying you for?" he yelled. "You think this is goddamn easy?"

"Let's just take a break, please," I said and started heading for the door.

"A break to do what? Process? Come here—" He grabbed my arm as I tried to slide past him, his hand blockish, rough. "I'll be dead before God ever lets me take a fucking break."

The desperation in that grip, I can't even begin to explain. He needed to enact his rage with blood and body, but all he had was a cold paper trail and his own fury, his own helplessness. I managed to twist free and made a break for the hallway. I rushed down the three flights of stairs, leaving Mr. Borghia on the landing above yelling, "We're not finished!" Except without teeth the words came out airy.

I called Charlie and we took the trailer that night. We drove 200 miles on Red Bull and drive-through burritos before finally stopping at a gas station near Trinidad. We parked between two semis hoping their mammoth cabs would block the parking lot floodlights, but artificial glow still leaked through our thin curtains. Charlie asked if I feared Mr. Borghia coming after me for abandoning him. I said I worried more about not getting paid. We were as spread out on the small bed as we could get, each leaning up against opposite walls. We had the windows cracked to let in cool night air and it smelled like dry pine and diesel. Even so, the trailer remained hot, stuffy. The sound of a lone car on the highway drifted in every few minutes like a river running far off.

Charlie peeled his t-shirt off. I put my hair up and changed into cotton shorts. From across the bed, Charlie held his hand out to me.

“What?” I asked him.

“Come here.”

“Why?”

“Just come here,” he said, leaning forward and gesturing for me to do the same. He took hold of my arm and gently pulled me to sit next to him. He cradled me and guided my head to rest on his chest.

“There,” he said, and his voice came from the cavern of his ribs. “That’s all.”

His skin felt a little bit sticky, his chest hair coarse. I marveled at how quickly tension melted out of my neck and shoulders. It only took a few even breaths, the muffled whoosh of air entering his lungs, and I started to drift off. Briefly I wondered why it couldn’t always be this way, but also why I couldn’t manufacture such comfort on my own.

“I’ve been reading this stuff on graph theory,” Charlie said. “And there’s a problem called Hadwiger’s Conjecture no one can solve. It’s really wild. I mean there are a lot of problems no one can solve. People always think there’s a right answer in math, but that’s just not true. The further you go, the less we know.”

I murmured something to agree but kept dipping in and out of consciousness, like missing the step on a staircase. In my half sleep, I swore I could feel photo paper between my fingers and hear the pop of a camera flash, the whine as it recharged. It was the crime scene photo of Elisa I held, but it was me they were photographing, sprawled and bloodied. Someone—the photographer, a detective, the coroner—put their hand between my head and the concrete where, fully dreaming, I lay. I wanted to resist because my hair was already sticky, matted with blood, and surely if I moved my brains would fall out. What little life I had left would drain away.

But the hand was Charlie’s, and it cupped the curve at the base of my skull gently, the warmth of his palm lifting me up and out of the dream.

“Hey, Sar? Sarah?” he was saying. “Sarah, are you sleeping?”

~

After his sermon, after the napping man snorts awake and the believers leave, Father Shash asks us what we think.

“How do you keep this place running?” I blurt, then realize I sound like a jerk and try to backtrack. “I mean, you don’t seem to have very many patrons. Or, I mean, a parish. You don’t have much of...a very large parish. A congregation? I don’t know. What do you call it?”

“It was great,” Charlie steps in.



Father Shash nods, grinning. I get the sense we could tell him his church makes no sense and he looks like a loon and he'd still beam. I notice he wears a small carved bear instead of a cross. He opens his arms with a sudden idea. "Let me show you around the grounds."

This is how we come to the sweat lodge, which looks mostly like a hollowed out mound of dirt with one squat opening to serve as a door. From what I understand, sweat lodges are seriously sacred things, and having some nutty minister show us one in the back of his desert church seems like a bastardization, but Father Shash is so goofy excited to tell us about how he built it, and the oneness of the love of Christ, and the universality of spiritual ceremonies, that I feel obliged to listen. Then he asks if we'd like to stay, if it seems like a part of our journey to join him in a ceremony that night.

Charlie says yes before I can say no, and when I look at him he's completely serious, deadpan serious, the way he gets when smoking a particularly potent strain of weed. Like every second is elongated, stretched out across many hours of a finite life, and he finally knows that each, long, breathless moment is a question, the weightiest question, and the answer is obvious. This time the question is, "Would you like to sweat out your sins here in New Mexico?" And this time the answer is, "Yes."

And so, just after the sun dips down, we strip to our underwear and say a prayer with Father Shash outside the lodge. The day's light extinguishes slowly. We stoop carefully and follow him into a darkness hot and close, complete. The ceiling is low and the walls curve, such that when we sit down cross-legged our backs bend to conform. Father Shash starts into a blessing of sorts, something monotonous, thankful, an invocation, and he ladles water onto hot rocks in a shallow pit at the middle of the lodge to release clouds of steam and new waves of heat.

The warmth seeps in—skin, muscle, blood, bone, none of it a barrier—and Father Shash leads us through a meditation. He asks us to forget our bodies. I can't see Charlie across the pit of rocks, and it scares me to think of being without him. In time, though, I stop straining to hold the vision of his outline. I settle in with my sweat.

It's a long uncomfortable time before anything starts to happen, and I want very much to get out. There's no way I can make it 45 minutes. I'll pass out. My brain will hemorrhage. In fact, maybe it's already happening, because suddenly I can see Elisa Borghia outside the lodge, doing her hair at a vanity table in the middle of the desert. She's sixteen still, with a flash of acne across her chin. Barefoot, she draws circles in the dirt with her big toe and hums. Whitney Houston, I think, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*. Although I can barely make it out over the thrum of Father Shash's voice.

What she doesn't know is that a few yards off, there's movement in the night. A wolf maybe, or coyote? A man? I can't make it out. The form swims and shifts the way things do in too little light, becoming now small and now large, standing up, crouching down. It's a hungry thing, hungry in a singular way, tinged with regret but insatiable nonetheless. What I wouldn't do to call out a warning or step between that starving thing and the girl, but when I move to try, a cold, implacable fear grips me, the kind belonging solely to dreams. All-encompassing in its clarity.

Then there's a hand on my bare arm, slick with perspiration, and Charlie says, "It's time to go, champ." *Champion of what?* I think. That thing is still out there somewhere.

Outside the sweat lodge, we stand barefoot on the cracked ground letting our skin dry into a chalky layer of salt. It's like coming up from underwater, that first breathe you take, the

split-second revelation that the world is not in fact viscous, but satiny and so very easy to move through.

“Wow, that was...something else,” I say. Charlie is too busy looking at the stars to hear me. His hair is slicked down in some places, sticking up in others, and his long, skinny body looks white and frail in the moonlight. I feel something—I don’t know whether to call it affection or embarrassment for the way he stands there, so nearly naked and unaware. I turn my eyes away and up. It’s true—the stars are worth staring at.

We say our goodbyes to the father and go to the trailer to get some sleep before leaving again in the morning. In the blankness of the dark inside the trailer, laying on the bed with Charlie, I can smell the stink coming from both of us, his warm and a little sweet, mine just sort of constant. I wonder suddenly how we haven’t slept together, love or no love.

“Hey Charlie,” I ask, “Would you ever marry me? Like if we both get old and don’t have anyone, would you do it?”

“That’s a weird thing to ask.”

“Would you?”

“I mean,” he pauses for a while. I can hear the bugs outside. “Probably not.”

“Wow, thanks a lot.”

“You asked.”

“Why not?”

“Oh I don’t know—because you bite your nails, like when you’re nervous, like right now.” It’s true—in the dark, I’d brought my thumb to my mouth without thinking and was biting absently at a piece of skin near my cuticle. Charlie takes my hand and lowers it. “You’re fine,” he says. Then after some time, again, “You’re fine.” And again, “You’re just fine.”

I'm trying to believe him. No one else seems fine—why should I? Charlie points through the inky air to the back window we'd left uncurtained and says, "Look." I don't see anything.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing, there's just nothing out there."

We go quiet and soon I can feel Charlie turn heavy next to me, asleep. Eventually, I follow him there, slowly letting go of waking, of waiting for the dark beyond the trailer, that awesome gaping night, to flood in and take us under, fill us up. Waiting. Still waiting.